Reviewer's report

Title: Sentinel node biopsy for breast cancer: is it already a standard of care? A survey of current practice in an Italian region

Version: 1 Date: 17 November 2003

Reviewer: Andrew Spillane

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General
This is a simple questionnaire directed to surgeons working in breast units in the Veneto area. There is a high response rate to what appears to be simple and straightforward questions. There is no comment on how many surgeons work at each of the 32 units performing SNB.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. I don't see any point doing a Chi squared assessment of academic vs district vs community.
2. The frequent use of sentences starting with "However" in the introduction is a bit much.
3. A discussion about the frequent use of SNB for DCIS > 2cm when most units (in my experience and reading of the literature) recommend it if there is microinvasion or > 5cm.
4. The discussion should spend a little more time directly quoting evidence about individual surgeon variability in finding sentinel nodes and the range of false negative rates using the larger multi-institutional studies in the literature.
5. A comment about the 28.1% of surgeons doing wide excision of the tumour and SNB under local anaesthetic. In my experience doing a proper SNB under local anaesthetic would be difficult in a reasonable percentage of cases. This probably relates to surgeons who only remove the hottest node(s) rather than apply a 10% rule.
6. A discussion about extra-axillary SNB. I suspect this was not asked about in the questionnaire? The frequent use of intradermal and subareolar injection techniques would indicate this is not as often a consideration when compared to peritumoural injection.

Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. The conclusion should emphatically state that doing SNB without adequate training and self-audit is wrong. I would hope a comment on how the authors are going to work towards facilitating implementation of a more rigorous adherence to such minimum standards.
2. Paragraph 2 of the discussion – the sentence starting “However, the…” should say “…give rise…” and not “…rise…”

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
The conclusion should emphatically state that doing SNB without adequate training and self-audit is wrong.

What next?: Accept after minor compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests: none