Reviewer's report

Title: Age-related differences in the clinical management of women with metastatic breast cancer

Version: 1 Date: 16 February 2006

Reviewer: Ralph J Lelle

Reviewer's report:

General

This is a well written paper on the course of patients with breast cancer from the time of metastasis until death. Although many statements and conclusions are well known, this article nicely summarizes and illustrates the clinical characteristics of these patients. This may provide useful information for the design of future trials.

However, several revisions need to be made before the article can be accepted for publication.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

As the authors state, all clinical charts were reviewed. Subsequently, information on co-morbidity such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, medication etc is available. These data need to be included.

Page 3, 3rd paragraph, line 7: Which 281 patients? Does that mean that 148 died of causes other than breast cancer? This would be a very large number. What are the characteristics of these patients (e.g. age, co-morbidity)?

As the paper is focusing on age, more details on age distribution should be given (e.g. as figure).

The authors have chosen three age groups: 20-49 years, 50-69 years, and 70+ years. However, for breast cancer treatment decisions fairly young of less than or equal to 35 years are considered to be a distinct high risk group. How many patients did belong to this age group and wouldn’t it make sense to list those as a fourth group?

Reporting of statistical testing needs to be revised:
Page 2, line 13, Page 4, last paragraph, line 3 and 4 and Page 5, 1st paragraph line 3, 2nd paragraph line 5, 3rd paragraph line 3, line 7: Statistical significance should be given instead of using vague statements such as "much more likely", "more likely", "appeared to be", "seemed to decrease", "somewhat higher".
Table 1 should include results of statistical testing between age groups, at least for the data on metastases. Also, for tables 3a-c statistical test results should be mentioned.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Data in table 2 would be clearer if p values of less than or equal to 0.05 were indicated as “not
significant”.

In table 2 all percentages in brackets should be marked as such and not only in the first column.

The paper may need some minor language revisions - although I need to point out that I am not a native speaker myself.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

none