Reviewer’s report

Title: Incarceration as a Key Variable in Racial Disparities of Asthma Prevalence

Version: 1 Date: 13 August 2009

Reviewer: grant waterer

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Major Compulsory Revisions

While the findings are potentially interesting without knowing the prevalence of asthma before incarceration it is impossible to determine if the prison environment contributes to the development or exacerbation of asthma or whether the same environmental factors that increase the risk of incarceration also increase the risk of asthma. Was no question regarding past medical history asked? Can this information be obtained? Are there other ways of obtaining this data?

With respect to exacerbations a major issue not addressed is the likely poor compliance in patients with a history of incarceration. As the major problem in asthma is getting patients to take their medications regularly, and there is a body of published work regarding the poor compliance with medical therapy after release from jail (e.g. for tuberculosis, HIV and hypertension) this factor needs consideration and assessment. Attitudes towards medication compliance were apparently not assessed. Is this data obtainable from the survey conducted?

There conclusion that prisons augment racial disparity in healthcare is not justified by the data presented. Specifically there is no evidence that prisons cause asthma. Much more likely is that they are frequented by individuals from backgrounds predisposing them to asthma which is compounded by poor compliance with medical therapy both before and after incarceration. I do however agree that the period of incarceration should be used to focus on healthcare education and it is a missed opportunity to maximise health with potential significant long term improvements that can be gained.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have received funding from Pharmaceutical companies that market asthma
medications - specifically AstraZeneca and GlaxoSmithKline. I do not believe these constitute any significant conflict of interest in my interpretation of this manuscript but I believe they should be declared.