Reviewer's report

Title: Rapid Health and Needs Assessments after Disasters

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Reviewer: Alden Henderson

Reviewer's report:

- Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In the abstract, the authors conclude that “the use of existing medical records or the use of routinely collected data collected in the aftermath of disasters is the most promising.” I believe that these data are useful but at often are a) not available because existing personnel have left area or the infrastructure to maintain system has been destroyed; b) contain incomplete information because people who are injured or ill either do not go to hospitals because of their condition, because they cannot travel to the hospital, or because the hospital is not operating. Consequently the information in these records do not adequately describe the new and changing situation after the disaster. I strongly recommend that the sentence be changed to the sentence the authors use in the conclusions and recommendations section that “the use of registries in combination with a brief questionnaire for rapid assessment…” This statement is much clearer that the one used in the abstract.

2. In the objectives, the authors state that “the primary goal of this article is to describe and analyze these aspects which will contribute to the development of a useful rapid assessment tool.” The aspects are anything that influences the “preparation and procedure of the assessment.” In the results section 12/22 had information on preparation, no publication described their choice of data collection and in the discussion, the authors state that “processing time of the results is missing.” In my assessments, the processing time was one half to one day. The authors did an excellent job in reviewing the literature but the published articles often do not contain the kind of information needed to achieve the authors’ objectives. The authors should interview the authors of the 33 articles to obtain the information that is missing in their article. In addition, the CDC has a disaster surveillance working group that created questionnaires and procedures for rapid assessment. The CDC also has a team that conducts most of the rapid assessments. The authors should talk to these groups for they are key informant who will provide information that is not included in published articles.

3. In the discussion, the authors write about “the burden of disaster victims.” In the assessments I conducted, the sample size was the smallest we could use to get a reasonable margin of error. We usually use 10%. The authors can make suggestions on the margin of error of the surveys. I agree that the burden should be low and every question that I include in my assessment is directly related to a relief response. For example, a question on do you have enough food/water is
directly related to providing food and water in the disaster area. My questionnaire is also limited to one page and about 10 questions. Authors should also talk about the benefit of a face-to-face interview. The disaster victims often said that they are glad that the government is doing something, surveyors often pass out information on health conditions and the situation to the respondent. I also feel that the interview can be therapeutic and had several people who I interviewed say this to me.

4. The authors rely on published articles but there are many assessments that are not in the literature. I suggest that the authors contact NGOs such as ICRC and USAID that conduct rapid assessments to obtain information on preparing and implementing rapid assessments.

- Minor Essential Revisions

1. We have discussed creating a standard questionnaire for disasters but realized that each disaster is a bit different and since questions must be related to relief efforts, a standardized questionnaire is not appropriate. What we have done is to have a pool of questions available that can be quickly added to a questionnaire. We also evaluate the question to make it more clear. For example, the question “how many people live here?” changed to “how many people slept here last night” to give us an objective response. I suggest the authors discuss having a pool of questions to create a questionnaire.

- Discretionary Revisions

none

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that i have no competing interests