Reviewer's report

Title: Gender and age differences in the recurrence of sickness absence due to common mental disorders: a longitudinal study

Version: 1 Date: 4 February 2010

Reviewer: Kristy Sanderson

Reviewer's report:

This interesting paper examines the time to recurrence of medically certified sickness absence due to common mental disorders in a large sample of workers from the Dutch Post and Telecommunication companies. Results were stratified by age and sex. A large majority of sickness episodes were due to distress and adjustment disorders rather than clinical depressive/anxiety disorders. Strengths of the study include the certified nature of the sickness absence, the length of follow-up, and the large sample size. Important characteristics of this sample to keep in mind include the extremely generous sick leave entitlements (by international standards) and the very high turnover of staff.

Major compulsory revisions

The course and clinical significance of ICD depressive/anxiety disorders versus distress/adjustment disorders is different in many respects, and the authors also note a tendency of OPs to diagnose distress/adjustment more frequently than depressive/anxiety disorders. It may be more useful to stratify analyses by these two groups (clinical disorder versus other forms of distress).

The sample includes a mix of occupations from call centre/client services, to technical services to post delivery staff. It is possible there are important differences between these groups that may affect risk of CMDs, risk of CMD-related sickness absence, risk of recurrence, and attendance demands in general. Was stratification by occupation/job type examined?

The authors found that the shortest median duration of sickness absence was in those under 35 years of age, and this age group also had the shortest median time-to-onset of recurrence. Was there any other administrative data available to the researchers that may aid in interpretation of these findings (e.g. employment grade)?

Minor essential revisions

Please clearly state the hypothesis being tested at the end of the Background section.

Please provide additional justification for defining recurrence based on a 28-day return to work period.

The Discussion could include more interpretation on how two important features
of this sample – the generous paid sick leave entitlements and the very high turnover – may have influenced the results.

Discretionary revisions

Distress has an ICD-10 code in the symptoms and signs “not elsewhere classified” Chapter, so it would generally not be referred to as a “mental disorder”. I therefore wouldn’t include it under the umbrella term “common mental disorders” in the same category as ICD-10 depressive and anxiety disorders.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.