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:** 23 February 2010

**Reviewer:** Marjan Vaez

**Reviewer's report:**

This paper aims to investigate the reoccurrence of sickness absence due to common mental disorders, including distress, adjustment disorders, depressive disorders and anxiety disorders, according to age, in male and female employees in the Netherlands.

General comment: In my opinion, this paper has the essential ingredients of a scientific. This longitudinal study included a large sample and the follow up time is long enough (7 years) to achieve the aim of the study. The report looks generally fine, however, the manuscript can be improved by taking the following comments into consideration:

**Background:**

Page 4: Common mental disorders (CMDs) are the second most frequent cause of sickness absence after musculoskeletal disorders.

The given references are studies from Norway and united kingdom, is that the case even in Netherland?

Page 4: The incidence of sickness absence due to CMDs is increasing when compared to sickness absence due to other diagnoses.

What is the incidence of sickness absence due to common mental disorders in the Netherlands during the study period and when did this increase started? Is the above mentioned state true for both short and long term sickness absence.

Information on what is already known on sickness absence due to common mental disorders by age, gender, type of occupation and social position.... is lacking in the background. It would be helpful to This information can then be used in the discussion to infer how the estimated prevalence of positive screens is likely to compare to prevalence that would be determined by clinical diagnoses.

**Methods**

More description about the study population and characteristics of employees included and excluded would be useful to make a more clear picture of the study population.

Reviewer# page 6 "and employees who resigned or retired during the study
period were censored on the day they left employment”. Were those employees with granted disability pension also censored on the day they have been granted?

Page 6: The total population consisted of 137,172 employees (62% men and 38% women), with a total of 363,461 person-years at risk. I’m not sure if the calculation of person-years (time at risk) is based on the period for being under risk of sickness absence due to common mental disorders or is that based on being under sickness absence regardless of the type of disorder? It is not clear if you checked out other diagnoses on the certificates for sick leave or not.

Page 7: You have excluded the employees who were absent from work due to illness for more than 13 weeks. I wonder about what happens after 13 weeks? How many are excluded according to this criteria? Among those how many had common mental disorders? A better description of excluded are needed.

Reviewer# Statistical analysis: There are some important issues that this study can provide but it requires more in-depth analysis. For instance sickness absence episodes should be divided into categories, namely short and long. Duration of episodes may have significant effects in recurrence particularly when age and gender are considered. It is possible that those who are younger have more episodes of short duration, but the elderly have fewer episodes of longer duration. It is important issue to consider when the aim of the study is to investigate recurrence of sickness absence due to CMD. The same pattern can be possible to occur between men and women. I’m not sure using only median duration of sickness absence due to CMD is the best measure herein. However better explanations of statistical analysis and the employed measurements are needed. It is not clear if the authors had access to other diagnoses or not and how the person years are calculated. As I have previously pointed out, it is not clear whether the risk period is the period people can be at risk for all diseases or is simply the risk period for common mental disorders. Figure 1 facilitates the first notice of this problem but the text should be clarified better.

Reviewer# discussion
As a reader, I wish a more robust discussion and synthesis of the scholarly litterateur focuses on gender and age differences in sickness absence due to mental disorders. There is not enough effort to explain the findings and relate them to previous research.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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'