Reviewer’s report

Title: Prevalence and correlates of physical disability and functional limitation among older people in Malaysia, a middle income country

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Reviewer: William S Shaw

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“Prevalence and correlates of physical disability and functional limitation among older people in Malaysia, a middle income country”

This manuscript describes results of a cross-sectional, population-based survey of older adults (N = 760) living in rural Malaysia to assess their physical disability and functional limitation. Assessment included two ADL measures and one measure of functional limitation, also measures of cognitive impairment, depressive symptomatology, visual acuity, and a disease checklist. The primary goal of data analysis was to evaluate potential predictors of either physical disability or functional limitation, and compare these with other study populations. Principal findings were that older adults in Malaysia experience more functional limitation and disability than in developed countries, but comparable levels to other middle-income, developing countries. Associations between variables were consistent with prior studies as well. The authors conclude that physical disability and functional limitation is common among older people in Malaysia.

The health status and disability of older adults in developing countries is an important global health concern, and geographic comparisons between countries, regions, and urban versus rural settings can be helpful to shape health policies and prioritize services. Strengths of the study include: (1) its focus on a rural, underserved population of older adults in a developing country; (2) a representative sampling strategy; (3) use of widely-recognized health status measures that facilitate international comparisons; and (4) inclusion of both self-report and observational measures. I have only minor comments:

Minor essential revisions:

1. Title: The title should reflect that participants were community-dwelling (not in hospitals or nursing homes) and that they were sampled from rural regions.

2. Introduction: The Introduction is extremely brief (one page only). As cross-cultural comparison is the primary theme of data analyses, additional context should be provided to describe living conditions for rural, older persons living in Malaysia. What are the presumed differences in wealth, lifestyle, culture, health beliefs, and healthcare access between rural and urban older adults living in Malaysia? Are there any profound characteristics in healthcare access and
practices in Malaysia that might make it unique from other Asian, middle-income countries. Some of these points are raised in the Discussion, but this also serves as rationale and reasoning for study formulation.

3. Sample and procedure: The manuscript indicates that older people residing in nursing homes were not included. Would their names have been included in the “comprehensive community list”? Also, perhaps other exclusions should be listed as well (those in hospitals or prisons, and any other reasons that an individual might not show up on the comprehensive community list).

Discretionary revisions:

4. The data analytic methods appear to be consistent with study aims and appropriate to the types of data collected. Although much of the analyses are descriptive in nature, this is an acceptable format for a first-time data collection of function and disability in this rarely studied population. Figure 2 might be deleted, as this does not help to clarify the nature of ethnic differences in ADL difficulties, and no specific data analyses were conducted to compare individual ADL responses by ethnicity.

5. The discussion provides a number of useful interpretations, and results are appropriately integrated with previous studies in other populations. The concluding sentence indicates that “these findings are important for targeting appropriate prevention and intervention strategies”, but no insights are provided by the authors. Based on study results, are there any sub-populations or health problems that might be given priority for additional studies focused on reducing or preventing disability in this population?

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

**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.