Reviewer's report

Title: Marital history, health and mortality among older men and women in England and Wales

Version: 1 Date: 9 April 2010

Reviewer: Stefan Fors

Reviewer's report:

This paper explores the associations between marital history, health and mortality among older adults in England and Wales, as well as the impact of socioeconomic conditions and women’s parity on these associations. The data is gathered from an extensive record-linkage dataset encompassing 1% of the population in England & Wales. Mortality and self-assessed long term illness are used as outcomes. Overall, the study is interesting and well executed, however I believe the manuscript would benefit from some minor revisions.

Minor essential revisions to consider:

1. The manuscript would benefit substantially by explicitly stating the specific aims of the study in the abstract, as well as earlier on in the introduction.

2. On p.6-7, arguments concerning the health effects of marriage dissolution and being never-married are intertwined. These are different conditions and should be treated as such. Thus, I suggest the health effects of marriage dissolution and of being never-married should be disentangled and treated separately.

3. On p.12, there is a reference to ‘results by current marital status’ (line 16 from the bottom) without reference to where in the table these results can be found. Later on in the text, however, it is stated that these results are to be found at the bottom of the table. This instruction would serve better at the first mention of these results.

4. On p.13 - first line, there is a mention of a 6% change in mortality risk. If I read the table correctly I believe that it should be a 4% change.

Discretionary revisions to consider:

5. The crude nature of the indicators of socioeconomic position in this study is likely to lead to residual confounding. This is a potential bias, especially for the women who have no measure of social class to complement the dichotomous measure of education. As this may bias the results considerably, I believe it should be mentioned as a limitation in the discussion.

6. Poisson regressions, rather than Cox-regressions, are used in order to assess differences in mortality risk. I assume that this is due to the extensive size of the dataset. However, this could be clarified in the text.
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