Author's response to reviews

Title: Drug problems among homeless individuals in Toronto, Canada: Prevalence, drugs of choice, and relation to health status.

Authors:

Michelle N Grinman (michelle.grinman@utoronto.ca)
Shirley Chiu (chius@smh.toronto.on.ca)
Donald A Redelmeier (dar@ices.on.ca)
Wendy Levinson (wendy.levinson@utoronto.ca)
Alex Kiss (alex.kiss@ices.on.ca)
George Tolomiczenko (gtolomiczenko@ccfc.ca)
Laura Cowan (laura@streethealth.ca)
Stephen W Hwang (hwangs@smh.toronto.on.ca)

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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Dear BioMed Central Editorial Team,

Re: MS: 3699492993096874 - Drug problems among homeless individuals in Toronto, Canada: Prevalence, drugs of choice, and relation to health status.

Thank you for the opportunity to revise the above manuscript for BMC Public Health. We have responded to all comments, as detailed below. Editor’s and reviewers’ comments are shown in **bold text** and our response to each comment is shown in regular text.

**Editor’s Comments:**

1. Include more context information within the background section of your abstract, in addition to the aims of your study.

We have added the following sentence to the background section of the Abstract: “Drug use is believed to be an important factor contributing to the poor health and increased mortality risk that has been widely observed among homeless individuals.”

**Reviewer 1 (Carrie Merscham)**

1. There is inconsistency in the paper on the adults with dependents, referred to in some places as "adults" and in other places as "women" but then the tables at the end suggest there were both men and women with dependents interviewed.

In our study, adults with dependent children were primarily women, with a very small number of men. In the revised version of our paper, we have amalgamated the women and men with children into a single category, which is now referred to as “adults with dependent children.”

2. I would suggest you better define a "drug problem." It seems you are equating drug use with drug problems, which may not necessarily be one in the same. While there is a brief mention of this on page, it seems expanding on the differences in functioning between use and functioning is important.

We have revised an entire paragraph in the Methods section (beginning with “Details were obtained about drug use, including the types of substances ever used, how recently each drug had been used, and frequency of use in the last 30 days.”) to clarify the distinction between drug use and drug problems. We have also revised the
last sentence of the Background section and the first paragraph of the Results section to highlight this distinction.

3. Finally, please note what drugs count as the non-heroin opiates.

Opiates other than heroin and methadone consisted of oxycodone, hydromorphone, meperidine, codeine, and pentazocine. This has been clarified in the Results section.

Reviewer 2 (Tracey Koehlmoos)

1. Please state that the study is part of a larger study of the homeless in Toronto earlier on than in the methodology section. I think this is important because it creates the limitation of excluding the homeless who are not registered for the health insurance scheme. (I find this a major limitation especially as it was 18% of potential respondents.)

This point has been clarified by the addition of the following sentences at the very beginning of the Methods section: “This study was part of a larger ongoing study of health care utilization among homeless individuals. For this reason, the study recruited a stratified random sample of homeless persons in Toronto in 2004-2005 who were registered with the province of Ontario’s universal health insurance program.”

2. In the Discussion, please describe the other studies in the opening para at least the author and the year so that the reader can clearly see the value of the comparison being made rather than having to flip to the references—particularly for the first sentence.

The first paragraph of the Discussion section has been revised as requested.

3. Are the results from the SF-12 presented in a table? Although the research team is familiar with the SF-12, the reader may very well not be—and the table with results and questions from the SF-12 should be marked clearly.

We have added a new table (Table 2) with results from the SF-12. The individual questions from the SF-12 are not shown, as they are not interpreted separately, but rather are used to generate the overall physical health and mental health scores that are shown in the table.

4. In the results, the sentence “among individuals with drug problems in the last 30 days, 27% identified drug and/or alcohol use as a factor keeping them from getting out of homelessness, compared to 5% among those without a drug use problem” Is this really a meaningful sentence? Consider rephrasing this presentation of results.
This sentence has been revised to read “Among individuals with drug problems in the last 30 days, only 27% identified drug and/or alcohol use as a factor keeping them from getting out of homelessness.”

Lastly, please note that upon reviewing the manuscript during the course of revisions, we identified a transcription error in our reporting of three of the p-values in Table 1 (mean pack-years smoked, age at first episode of homelessness, and duration of current episode of homelessness). Therefore, we have corrected this in this revised version.

We hope that these revisions meet with your approval.

Sincerely yours,

Michelle Grinman, MD