Reviewer's report

Title: Pulmonary function, respiratory symptoms, and dust exposures among workers engaged in early manufacturing processes of tea: a cohort study

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Reviewer: Juergen Buenger

Reviewer's report:

In general this paper is a nice piece of work, but has some shortcomings.

Major:
Generally, the control group should have been recruited from blue collar workers as well, since education and social standards of white collar workers are different and have high influence even on respiratory symptoms and lung function. Additionally, the control group is tentatively too small.

The statistical models should be reviewed by an epidemiologist or statistician. To my feeling the cohort and especially the subgroups are too small for a reliable multiple regression analysis.

The authors state on page 5 that there are “few” studies on early-stage tea manufacturing” but they do not reference or discuss them in the paper. Reference [26] on page 16 is not listed in the references.

Minor:
It should be stated in the abstract and the methods section that only 58 tea workers participated in the on-site investigation and the cross-shift lung function measurements.

On page 13, second line, “predictor of both FEV1/FVC and MMF” must be corrected into “predictor of both reduced FEV1/FVC and MMF”. This holds also true for line 3 of the next sentence.

On page 14 the authors discuss an exposure to fungi in late-stage tea manufacturing but do not report about the situation in early-stage manufacturing. Do exposures to molds also occur in these work tasks? This may have influence on toxicity and allergenicity of the dust.

The whole first paragraph of the discussion describing the steps of early-stage tea processing should be shifted into the introduction.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the
statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.