Reviewer’s report

Title: Can work ability explain the social gradient in sickness absence: a cross-sectional study of a general working population in Sweden

Version: 2 Date: 7 November 2011

Reviewer: Karl Bang Christensen

Reviewer’s report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Previous studies have found low socioeconomic status to predict sickness absence. This study shows incident sickness absence to be associated with low socioeconomic status. Please explain more clearly why this is important.

2. Go beyond the simple comparison of proportions in Table 2. The readers need a chi-squared tests to tell them if there is an age difference between the two samples in women. The readers do not need to be told that 10% differs significantly from 15%, that 47% do not differ significantly from 49% and that 43% differ significantly from 36%. Feel free to keep these comparison, but do provide us with the information we need.

3. For the three or four dichotomous variables it is very silly to provide the * saying that there is a significant difference in the proportion with low 'Mental work ability' AND a significant difference in the proportion with high 'Mental work ability'.

4. Since self-reported work ability is the product of both individual resources and work demands. Wouldn't one expect incident cases of sick-listed employees to score lower simply because they are sick-listed. In other words: when we consider 'work-ability' in the working population and 'work-ability' in the sick-listed population is it the same thing? Please discuss this. The statement that "Self-reported physical work ability was a strong explanatory factor implies that the mechanism behind this social gradient is partly due to a social gradient in work ability" could be reconsidered.

Minor Essential Revisions

5. Should there be a group with "Current sick-leave=No"

6. Cite recent methodological work on this topic (Lange and Hansen, Epidemiology 2011;22: 575–581) and acknowledge that more complicated methodology may be needed in order to provide answers.

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