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: 23 November 2011

Reviewer: Ossi Rahkonen

Reviewer's report:

• Major Compulsory Revisions
  - I had some difficulties following the sample procedure, the authors could at least give some figures of the response rate in the data section (I found 52% in the end of discussions). Were those people being on sickness absence before the responding the questionnaire (6.6%) omitted from the analyses. Was sick leave also asked in the questionnaire? Was it analysed?

• Minor Essential Revisions
  - the conclusion of the abstract mainly repeats the results. Conclusion needs to highlight public health and/or research issues.
  - data; randomized working population data, women n=1501, men n=1214; are women employed more than men in Sweden?
  - variables, also other variables (income, education etc) needs to be described, categorizations etc.
  - table 2 and table 3; being lower non-manual women show low sickness absence; do the authors have any information what are the largest female occupations in this SEP group?
  - I missed page numbers; about page 10 below table 2; women and men comparison; were the ORs estimated comparing similar SEP groups? For example, unskilled manual men OR=1.0 and women OR 2.35?
  - discussion about page 18; that those two items of WA index used are reliable and valid needs a reference.
  - response rate is low, was it even lower for men? Could the authors estimate whether the response rate has any effect on the results.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'