Reviewer's report

Title: Latin American immigrants have limited access to health insurance in Japan: a cross sectional study

Version: 1 Date: 11 January 2012

Reviewer: HIDEKI HASHIMOTO

Reviewer's report:

Authors conducted a community survey on health insurance coverage among Latin American immigrant workers and their family in a Japanese city. The authors found that 20% of respondents were without public health insurance. About a quarter of the respondents answered economic concerns as the reason for lack of insurance status, followed by employment reasons.

This study conducted a very rigorous approach to describe the current conditions of a targeted population, and the results are quite convincing. However, the reviewer found their discussion and conclusion is not logically based on their own results of the survey. Besides, the reviewer has some difficulties to understand how preceding qualitative research shaped the current community survey questionnaire and interpretation of the results.

1. Major compulsory revisions

The authors concluded that “Reasons for this disparity in insurance coverage are mainly due to economic constraints for the immigrants and the companies’ failure to adequately offer legally mandated coverage to its workers.” However, I found it difficult to logically induce this conclusion solely based on the results found in tables.

Their logistic analysis presented in Table 4 identified, number of children, education attainment, knowledge about mandatory inclusion, and chronic disease conditions are significant predictors of uninsured status. In Table 3, “employer’s refusal for providing EHI” shares only 2% of reasons for lack of insurance coverage. Thus, solely based on numbers presented in these tables, I am not convinced by the argument that companies’ failure makes a major problem. Furthermore, “too expensive” does not precisely tell specific constraints for the immigrants, because the same reason should be universally found among the Japanese uninsured with lower household income. “Have to save money” and “cheaper if I pay medical expense” are a choice that the respondent made, rather than “constraints.” Categorizing these different items into an umbrella name of “economic” reason is too simplistic and does not help the policy makers find policy implication out of the results.

It seems that the authors reached this conclusion rather based on the shorter contract term compared to respondents’ actual period of working career, of which average numbers are presented only in the text. The authors speculated that the employers avoid mandated health insurance coverage by segmenting contract
terms shorter than conditions for mandate coverage. I speculate that the author’s speculation is not totally ungrounded, and they should have some “evidence” from their preceding qualitative interviewing with immigrants.

If the authors believe logistic regression results and tables are necessary to make their argument, it should be logically linked to their conclusion. Otherwise, if they want to make the conclusion as is now, they should provide convincing numbers and analysis.

I would doubt that this leap of logic happened because the authors tried to identify “external constraints” forcing the immigrant workers into uninsured status, but to do so based on the questionnaire survey which only reflected perception and behaviors of immigrants, rather than by capturing external constraints per se through objective data. I assume collecting objective data on immigrant’s working conditions and fringe benefit was hardly obtainable. Thus, I believe that qualitative research of immigrants and other informants in the region would have helped the authors fill the gap. That should have been the very strength of “mixed approach” that the authors took in this research.

2. Minor essential revisions

1) Detailed description of sampling, frame, and operation of survey was very helpful. To the contrary, the information on preceding qualitative analysis, the process of questionnaire development, and possible role of qualitative analysis in the interpretation of questionnaire survey results was hardly provided, should be explicitly described in methods section.

2) Table 1-A&2; percent for column rather than for row is readable and informative to compare those insured and uninsured.

Descretionary revisions;
The authors could add clearer discussion on:

3) Why was the history of occupational accident significantly related to the likelihood of uninsured status? It would be more natural if the reverse is true, because accident experience will better motivate immigrants to be covered by insurance?

4) How are lower education, larger number of children, and lack of knowledge about mandatory system related to their lower chance to be covered by EHI and/or CHI?

Hope this helps the authors revise the manuscript.

Formatted evaluation;
1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? YES
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Partially YES
3. Are the data sound? YES
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? YES
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Currently Not satisfactory
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? YES
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Seemingly yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? YES
9. Is the writing acceptable? YES

Reviewed by Hideki Hashimoto, MD DPH.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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.