Reviewer’s report

Title: Short-term Sick Leave and Future Risk of Sickness Absence and Unemployment - the Impact of Health Status

Version: 3 Date: 15 July 2012

Reviewer: Justin Scanlan

Reviewer’s report:

Overall, the authors have made substantial improvements to their manuscript in response to the various reviewers’ comments. This manuscript is now essentially ready for publication, with a few revisions listed below.

Comment 1: Minor essential revision:
Abstract, Background: The sentence “Although sick leave reflects underlying health problems, some studies have suggested that sick leave may have consequences beyond the consequences of the underlying illness, but few studies have aimed at studying consequences of sick leave while adjusting for ill health.” is very long and covers three separate – but linked – ideas. To enhance readability, this sentence should be broken into 2 or 3 sentences.

Comment 2: Major compulsory revision:
Abstract, Results: This section is ambiguous. The authors present the final, adjusted odds ratios for long term sick leave, long term unemployment and disability pension, but then note “Adjusting for the different measures of health status only slightly changed the effect estimates.” When I read this, I interpret the first results presented as crude odds ratios and then the comment being in reference to slight changes in the crude odds ratios when adjustments were made. Also, the results section in the abstract does not mention short term unemployment.

I would suggest that this section of the abstract be re-written to something like: “Crude odds ratios showed an increased risk of long-term sick leave (OR 2.00; CI 1.62-2.46) and short-term unemployment (OR 1.76; CI 1.35-2.29) for individuals exposed to more than one sick leave spell. There were no increased odds of long term unemployment (OR 0.54; CI 0.28-1.04) or disability pension (OR 0.72; CI 0.42-1.24). Adjusting for the different measures of health status resulted in the odds ratio for short-term unemployment no longer being significant (OR 1.29; CI 0.97-1.29), but only slightly changed the effect estimates for other outcomes.”

This change adds 22 words to the overall abstract, but I believe that it substantially improves the overall clarity of the abstract.

Comment 3: Minor essential revision:
Background, Para 2, last sentence: Change “increase” to “increases”.

Comment 4: Minor essential revision:
Method, Study sample, first sentence. This sentence is very long and needs to be cut into at least two sentences. It could be changed to: “For the purpose of this study we restricted the cohort to “healthy” employed participants aged between 18 to 59 in 2002. We excluded individuals who were unemployed, on full- or part-time disability pension or on old age pension in 2002, or who had long term sick leave (> 30 days) or inpatient care for three days or on more than three occasions in 2001. This resulted in a final study sample of 11,156 individuals.”

Comment 5: Minor essential revision
Methods, Outcomes: The two paragraphs should be combined into one paragraph.

Comment 6: Minor essential revision:
Results, Para 1, Sentence 3: the word “were” is incorrectly used. The sentence may read more clearly if it was changed to “Prevalence differences were also detected between socioeconomic groups: only 8.0% of self-employed individuals reported high STSL compared to 18-22% among other socio-economic groups.”

Comment 7: Major compulsory revision
Discussion, Paragraph 4: I agree with the second reviewer’s (H.R.) comments on this paragraph from the original manuscript. While I agree with the authors that this paragraph presents important information, it is awkward in its current form. This paragraph needs to be revised to make the content clearer. Additionally, this paragraph presents the “gap” in the existing research, so is better placed in the background section, rather than first being included in the discussion section. This issue could then be referred back to in the discussion.

Comment 8: Minor essential revision
Discussion, Strengths and limitations, Para 4: The sentence “Moreover, we have no other available data on the outcome.” What outcomes are the authors referring to? What other data might be available? This sentence should be deleted or more explicitly described.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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