Reviewer's report

Title: Is Council Tax Valuation Band A Predictor of Mortality? - Cross-Sectional Study

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Reviewer: Dr Anthony Staines

Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Advice on publication: Accept after discretionary revisions

This is a nice paper showing a strong, though not surprising link between a measure of the value of a house, and the risk of death for people living in those houses. The principal finding is to suggest that Council Tax Valuation Bands could be a useful supplement to or replacement for other address based measures of social status.

I have several caveats, and feel that it would be greatly improved by significant re-writing of parts of the manuscript. I also feel strongly that it is worth doing this.

1) Abstract - this is written in a sort of telegraphophese which is very hard to follow. I suggest re-writing in a less abbreviated format.
2) Introduction -
"Death is not always a reflection of health because of the incidence of fatal accidents and other unexpected tragedies"
This isn't in fact true - there's a very high correlation between population risk of accidental death (or injury) and other measures of population health.
3) Definition of Council Tax valuation - this is based on the sale value of the house in 1992 - not simply the size. Valuation was done (mostly) by local estate agents walking past the outside of the houses.
4) Denominator data - why did you extract 25% sample lists of your practice population? I'm not entirely clear what exactly you did, and would welcome more detail here. The relationship between the electronic system and the paper system is also unclear to me. You need to specify very precisely your underlying population.
5) Death data - did you restrict yourselves to deaths occurring in the denominator population? It looks as if you took all of the deaths, and applied these against a 1 in 4 sample of the practice population. The effect of this on your interpretation of your results should be considered. It's probably not very large, but you should make what you did a little clearer.
6) Ages included - Which tables include people under 50 and which exclude them?
7) Analysis - while the analysis which you have chosen - comparing A,B to C+ is valid, you have probably lost some power. One of the more interesting things about English social gradients is the way they affect people in the meddle and upper levels of the population. There is some evidence from my work and papers published by Peter Phillimore and Chris Power, of a distinct difference between the
health of the top fifth of the UK population and the next fifth down. Your tables support this, and I suggest that you consider the implications of this.

8) Analysis - your analysis is appropriately simple! If you have access to it, it would be worth using Poisson regression methods (to which SMR's are an approximation) to explore your data further. I do not feel that this is necessary for your manuscript to be accepted.

9) Your modest disclaimer notwithstanding -
"This is a modest study in general practice ecology. Its uses simple techniques and its conclusions should be cautious. But mortality statistics are inherently unambiguous and the findings are clear and consistent. In fact we have repeated the study, effectively, on three independent data sets and the results superimpose..."

there are several questionable statements here. Mortality statistics can be highly ambiguous, and require careful interpretation. Your three data sets are not in any sense independent. Nonetheless finding the same trend in three consecutive time periods does considerably strengthen your conclusions.

10) The main finding of your work is to suggest that CTVB could be a valuable adjunct to (or replacement for) other measures of ‘social status’ in epidemiological and health service research studies. I agree that more work needs to be done to evaluate this, but I commend you for thinking of it, and doing it. Is there other published work using these ideas?

Competing interests:

None declared.