Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation of school absenteeism data for early outbreak detection, New York City.

Version: 2 Date: 24 August 2005

Reviewer: Howard S Burkom

Reviewer's report:

General

My entry in the Confidential Comments box was [Your pdf creation process eliminated much of my punctuation and clouded some of my comments. Please let me know how to avoid this for the future.] I hope this didn't cause miscommunication.

My comments were not intended to knock the force out of the authors' conclusions, but only to clarify them. This work is consistent with similar studies I've seen, and the authors' findings should be published and understood by those interested in using school-based sources for health surveillance. See below.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The conclusion should contain the following ideas: (a) this is a nonspecific data source, and your work further demonstrated that the substantial outlier removal required strongly limits the number of useful days of data, (b) you tried nominal alerting methods with reasonable adjustments, and the results may tend to confuse the surveillance picture as much as improve it, (c) the large amount of effort it would take to model these data for better predictions would be a poor investment for the nonspecific information you would gain, and (d) therefore you will not use absenteeism as a primary detection tool (but are looking into more specific school-based evidence). Most of this is in the full-text conclusion. Put at least the main thrust into the abstract conclusion.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

My point about your CuSum reset criterion was not that it is unnecessary, but that the 0.5 standard deviation limit may be hard to meet and weakens the criterion. You can envision cases where the percent absent stays just below a standard deviation above the mean and you would still get the nuisance alerts. However, the incorrect claim has been removed, and the new language is acceptable.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the
major compulsory revisions

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

**Quality of written English**: Acceptable

**Statistical review**: No

**Declaration of competing interests**: I declare that I have no competing interests.