Reviewer's report

Title: Automated, sustainable, broad-based, near real-time public health surveillance using presentations to hospital Emergency Departments in New South Wales, Australia

Version: 4 Date: 5 December 2005

Reviewer: R Dennis

Reviewer's report:

General
I have looked at the paper and its history, the abstract, the manuscript file, the previous review on the manuscript, the authors’ cover letter and the revised manuscript. I also believe that my role is now more that of a judge/arbiter, than that of a peer providing a third evaluation of the manuscript and of its revisions.

I commend the peer reviewers, and especially reviewer #2, for a very thorough and elegant review that has greatly enhanced the quality of the revised version of the manuscript. I also believe that the authors have point wise and comprehensively responded to the queries and comments asked, and that the responses and the changes in the manuscript make it now a worthy article to share with our scientific community. I would recommend approval.

I would have only two recommendations:

While the text, specifically the discussion and conclusions sections, do provide now a balanced and cautious view of the potential advantages and limitations of this novel surveillance approach, of its -yet unproven- usefulness/effectiveness in the field, of the provisional nature of the validation approaches undertaken, of the need for formal evaluations, and of the –still early- methodological stage it is in, this is not reflected at all in the Abstract. I would recommend that the “Conclusions” paragraph, in the Abstract, adds a sentence addressing these caveats.

I believe that if the title includes the word “system”, it would nicely limit what seems now like a more ambitious undertaking than what it is really described; and I would remove the word “sustainable”, as the authors agree that this element (efficiency) was not really evaluated: “Automated, broad-based, near real-time public health surveillance system using presentations to hospital Emergency Departments in New South Wales, Australia”.

Lastly, I have no conflict of interest in or around this topic, or in any of the products described.

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

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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)
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)