Reviewer's report

Title: The incidence of varicella and herpes zoster in Massachusetts as measured by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) during a period of increasing varicella vaccine coverage, 1998-2003

Version: 1 Date: 3 March 2005

Reviewer: Anne A Gershon

Reviewer's report:

General

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
This paper is a straightforward analysis of the incidence of varicella and zoster in Massachusetts, based on an active surveillance program in a state with high coverage of varicella vaccine. An increase in the incidence of zoster was found between 1999-2003. These results differ from a published CDC study done in Washington state (ref 31). That an increase might occur as the result of widespread use of varicella vaccine was predicted in a number of modeling studies (which are well quoted in the manuscript.) These investigators are trying to present a fair and honest assessment of whether zoster might be increasing as a result of varicella vaccination. They point out that the increase they observed might or might not be due to varicella vaccine (or might be only partly due to it.) It is important that this manuscript be published, because this is a pressing issue.

The only thing that might be added to the limitations section is that zoster was diagnosed (of necessity for this kind of study) clinically and not (usually anyway) by laboratory testing. Undoubtedly, some cases were self-diagnosed rather than physician diagnosed. This variable would be the same for all years examined. However, if people are now more aware of zoster than they were a few years ago, there might be a bias towards more attribution of rash illness to be zoster than there was say in 1999 or 2000.

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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)

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What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No
Declaration of competing interests:

I have served as a consultant for varicella vaccine issues to Merck (producers of varicella vaccine in US) and GSK (producers of vaccine in Europe and Australia). I have received small honoraria for this activity but no major amounts of money. I have had minor research support from Merck for my laboratory.