Reviewer's report

Title: Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differentials of C-reactive protein levels: a systematic review of population-based studies

Version: 1 Date: 28 June 2007

Reviewer: Andrew Moore

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting topic which has not been reviewed previously in any detail (that I can find), though it has been mentioned in a recent non-systematic review of CRP (Am J Med. 2006 Feb;119(2):166.e17-28). In terms of methods used, it seems fine: good searching for studies, good description of studies included, and good criteria for inclusion. In all, a quick calculation indicated that the included studies involved about 125,000 participants, and while there may have been some overlap this is still an impressive number.

Where I have a problem is that there don't seem to be any actual results, other than a description in the text of the results section, which is basically a “this study said this, and that study said that” approach. I would like to see a table of the studies with their results: mostly we are told that a number of studies showed an association, while others did not, or did with minimal but not full adjustment. We get no overall feel for the magnitude of the effect, though in the review above the effect of socioeconomic factors was described as minor (which is not to say that it is not important).

As the review stands, the reader is faced with getting copies of all the papers and pulling out these figures for her/himself. A systematic review should do better than leave the reader unsatisfied like this, because otherwise it has merit only because of the results of the search strategy – everything else is taken on trust.

The comments below are designed to help to improve the paper and overcome these problems.

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

Produce a Table 2, with the details of the main results of the papers in terms of CRP and SEP or ethnicity. It is unlikely any meta-analysis can be done, and the results will be essentially descriptive, but at least the results are there, readers can see their magnitude (which also should be commented upon in the text), and provide others with the raw data to have clever ideas about meaning or analysis.

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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)

Give some indication of the amount of information in the text – 125,000 participants in total, X,000 commenting on SEP, Y,000 on ethnicity etc. X,000 in USA, G,000 in Kenya, or whatever.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None

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, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests