Reviewer's report

Title: Characteristics that contribute to good self-rated health of non-disabled elderly living alone in Japan: a cross-sectional study

Version: 1 Date: 20 August 2007

Reviewer: Shahin Shooshtari

Reviewer's report:

General
The submitted manuscript is based on an original research, which explores determinants of good self-rated health among the non-disabled elderly living alone in Japan. This research is very interesting and important as it focuses on determinants of good self-rated health among the non-disabled elderly. There is an extensive literature on determinants of poor self-rated health, but limited is known what contributes to a more positive assessment of health among the older population. Additionally, to my knowledge, there has not been any study conducted in Japan, with such a focus. Thus, the research reported in this manuscript, is very important and has the potential to significantly add to the literature in the field.

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

I have a number of comments and questions, which will require major revisions to the manuscript.

1) The first comment is general and relates to the content of the paper overall. The paper is focused on the study factors, those included in the analysis. There are a number of other factors that are known to be important in relation to self-assessed health among the elderly population. They include factors such as individuals’ socio-economic status, marital status, place of residence, physical activity, regular health check-ups, moderate drinking, and access to health, social and recreation services. These are just a few examples among many others. The authors need to a) expand on the Background Section of the manuscript to have a more in-depth discussion of broad range of factors that affect health and self-rated health among the older population; b) to explain (in the Methods Section) why they have focused on a limited number of physical, psychological and social indicators; and c) discuss the limitations of their study in the Discussion Section.

2) Cognitive impairment and dementia are major health concerns among the elderly population world-wide. The study reported in this manuscript is based on self-reported data collected through a survey of the older adults in Japan. Although study sample consists of those who were non-disabled according to the
criteria outlined on page 5, but I am wondering about the accuracy of the information if the person had dementia due to Alzheimer’s disease or other conditions. Particularly, I am suspicious about the accuracy of information on chronic diseases as reported by the study subjects themselves. This is one of the limitations of the study, which needs to be discussed in the paper, perhaps in the Discussion Section. If those with cognitive impairment and dementia have been excluded from the study population, then that needs to be clearly explained in the Methods Section.

3) It is difficult for me to consider “regular habit of walking” as one of the indicators measuring social activity. Walking with someone on a regular basis is social activity, but not the habit by itself, without knowing if somebody accompanies the older person.

4) What are the response categories for social networks? Why this indicator is based on >= 1-2 times/week visual or non-visual contact? The authors need to cite any reference in support of their operational definition for this concept.

5) In the Statistical analysis section, there is no explanation of why logistic regression was used to study determinants of self-rated health. There is also no explanation on how the logistic regression models were developed and study factors were entered into the models. In the title of tables 3 and 4, it is mentioned “stepwise…..”. That information should be added to the section on Statistical 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)

1) On page 5, it says “Reports on SRH have focused on community-dwelling elderly. There are few reports that focus on SRH and related factors of the elderly living alone.”

I would like the authors to clarify what they mean by community-dwelling elderly? To me, those are older adults living in the community and not institutions. They can live in the community either by themselves (alone) or with family, friends or in groups.

2) I assume that the survey questionnaire was originally in Japanese language. The translated version of the SRH question and the response categories do not fit well together. The question was: “In general, how do you think about your health?” and the response categories were (1) excellent, (2) good, (3) fair, and (4) poor. The authors may want to check on the accuracy of the translation.

3) On page 5, authors presented total number of residents aged 65 or older who live alone in Takatsuki city of Japan. They need to cite the source for that data.

4) There is no information on the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire used for the purpose of their study. The authors need to provide
more information on the development of the survey questionnaire itself, its content and validity and reliability of the questions used.

5) The authors need clearly explain why they have dichotomized the study outcome, which is SRH variable. The explanation provided on page 6 is not sufficient.

6) On page 6, authors need to explain what are instrumental ADL (IADL) as one of the eight items to measure physical health.

7) On page 7, what are the chronic conditions considered in the study? What was the definition of chronic disease itself?

8) The authors need to explain why weight loss has been considered as one of the eight measures of physical health? And why a decrease of 5 Kg in the past 6 months was used to define weight loss? They need to cite a reference for the criteria used.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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.