Reviewer's report

Title: Ethnicity and the ethics of data linkage

Version: 1 Date: 26 September 2007

Reviewer: Akira Akabayashi

Reviewer's report:

General

This commentary is invaluable, and worthy of publication. The author raised two ethical objections to data linkage that need to be addressed: informed consent and the issue of ethnicity. Here I offer a few discretionary points from an international perspective.

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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)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1) The terminology of ethnicity is likely to be the source of continuing debate and will change because of fashion and political imperative (e.g., BMJ 1996; 312:1094). The BMJ debate further states:

So that researchers can compare their results now and in future, authors should try to use accurate descriptions rather than catch all terms in common use. Authors should describe in their methods section the logic behind their "ethnic" groupings. Terms used should be as descriptive as possible and reflect how the groups were demarcated. For example, "black" as a group description is less accurate than "self assigned as black Caribbean (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys category)" and "Asian" less accurate than "UK born individuals of Indian ancestry" or "French born individuals of Vietnamese ancestry."

Also, if this study were conducted in South-Asia, then the identified group would be categorized as a majority group. Furthermore, the ethnic majority in Scotland may be an ethnic minority among the global population. I wonder if perhaps there is a need to further describe the definition and concept of ethnicity in this kind of research. The author may want to raise these points in the commentary.

2) The author stresses that robust procedures for monitoring its ethical aspects and ensuring positive public approval need to be devised. If this kind of study
operates within an ‘international context,’ who will monitor the study, and who will be ‘the public’?

**What next?:** Accept after discretionary revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest 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'