Reviewer's report

Title: Estimating the costs of school closure for mitigating an influenza pandemic

Version: 1 Date: 2 October 2007

Reviewer: Erik Buskens

Reviewer's report:

Judgement pertaining to current version: Reject because too small an advance to publish. An article of limited interest.
Quality of written English: acceptable.
The manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined? See below
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work? Yes
3. Are the data sound and well controlled? Not applicable.
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Not applicable.
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Should be improved. For detailed suggestions see below.
6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes.
7. Is the writing acceptable? Yes.

Competing interests: I have in the past five years received reimbursements from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this paper, either now or in the future. In this case a pharmaceutical company developing a vaccine against pandemic influenza, which might in fact profit from conventional methods of prevention appearing inefficient.

Major Compulsory Revisions:
The paper focuses on the (societal) costs associated with school mitigation during a potential influenza pandemic. As such this very narrow part of a preparedness plan might be interesting to evaluate. However, the current approach does not address any savings (and diminished pressure on the health care system) that might result from mitigation. The current ‘one-sided’ evaluation will thus look poor or inefficient when directly compared to active treatment such as vaccination or antiviral therapy, where the number of cases of influenza avoided is more straightforward to conceive. The ultimate goal, however, is similar. The paper would improve and be more balanced if this aspect would be added.

'School closure is likely to significantly exacerbate the pressures on the health
system.’

The above sentence is the closing line of the abstract. It would appear that the costs of school closure fall outside the realm of health care and as for other pressures it is not clear what the authors infer. Also, it is not the net (incremental) costs the authors focus on. Instead they only draw inference on the investment (without taking into account return on investment).

Methods section last line page 3: ‘We assume that these individuals would take absenteeism to care for these children’.

How about grand parents or other informal care givers? Taking care of grand children may also occur if the grand parents are not actual members of the same household.

As a result the cost estimates presented seem too high.

1st paragraph page 6: This industry specific absenteeism was then evaluated in monetary values using both sector specific wage (from LFS) and average wage from DWP. These industry costs were aggregated to give an aggregate national estimate.

Wages may not accurately reflect societal costs due to losses in productivity. This should be elaborated on and preferably estimated as well.

Minor Essential Revisions:

Last line of the introduction is somewhat convoluted. Suggestion: This paper aims to estimate the economic cost of school closure to the United Kingdom. In addition those sectors likely to incur the greatest costs are identified.

Discussion page 8, 4th line from bottom: ‘That is, school closure, plus illness absenteeism, could reduce the workforce of the health sector by up to 50% at the peak of the epidemic.’

The absenteeism due to illness is new data not referenced or presented before. The readers would not be able to verify this statement.

Discretionary Revisions:

Have the authors considered estimating the costs associated with extra teaching efforts required to bring the children up to level? Or the cost associated with later entry into the labour force?

Also, the paper could be shortened further when truly focussing on the message of the losses in production and societal costs ensuing from school mitigation.