Reviewer's report

Title: Relationship between body image disturbance and incidence of depression: the SUN prospective cohort

Version: 1 Date: 5 September 2008

Reviewer: David Castle

Reviewer's report:

This paper looks at a prospective cohort of Spanish students assessed at baseline for "body image disturbance" and "incidence of depression" at follow up. The findings are essentially of no association and this is somewhat at odds with the established literature albeit that the established literature is largely cross-sectional in nature.

The strengths of this study include the notably large number of subjects and the prospective design. The limitations include how generalisable the sample are and also how representative they are even of the students who might have been eligible; I would like to see some details of the numbers of eligibles, the numbers actually participating in the study and any differences between those eligible who chose not to participate and those who did participate. It would also be good to see some analysis of similarities and/or differences between those who were followed up and those who were not followed up.

The use of the terms “underestimated their body image” and “overestimated their body image” are to my mind not accurate. Indeed, this study merely looked at ratings on the Stunkard Figures which can really only assess weight and shape. This is particularly pertinent to the men as the Stunkard Figures are not really good at depicting muscularity which is a particular issue for men. Also, there is no measure of other aspects of appearance other than weight and shape and also no estimation of attitude towards and/or importance of body image for the individual. All of these are potentially important issues which need to be addressed by the authors.

The definition of depression at follow up is somewhat limited given it is self-report. Also the use of antidepressants as a proxy measure is not acceptable as antidepressants might be used for all sorts of other reasons including eating disorders. It is noted that the authors do look specifically at the group who report depression (excluding those who merely commenced an antidepressant but did not report depression) and this is to be commended, albeit that it does reduce the number of participants. The authors also control for certain confounding variables but do not control for variables such as family history of depression or adverse life events which might impact on the incidence of depression. I was not sure whether controlling for BMI as a potential confounding factor is appropriate given that this was instrumental in the definition of “body image disturbance”.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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'