Reviewer's report

Title: Sick-leave track record and other potential predictors of a disability pension
A population based study of 8,218 men and women followed for 16 years

Version: 4 Date: 31 January 2009

Reviewer: Sturla Gjesdal

Reviewer's report:

Wallman T et al. Sick-leave track record and other potential determinants of
disability pension - Comments to the revised version:

The new version is improved.
The introduction has been “boiled down”
The review of previous literature is better, and the authors have tried to compare and discuss their own findings in relation to previous results (p. 17-18).

However, there are still some important concerns, some compulsory revisions are needed

1. Length of paper. There are no word count. Still the style is too narrative, and might be shortened considerably, especially methods section. There is much information that is not directly relevant, and there are several un-necessary words throughout. Most of page 6 might be deleted. It would be easier to read if both methods, results and discussion sections were organised into subsections.

2. Previous literature. In the introduction the authors still bundle together 21 references and try to review them by one sentence (last sentence first para p 4). Later it seems that the authors know that these studies are very different. One group of studies concerns predictors of future disability pension in the general population. A large part of this literature, in the same way as the present paper, used data from population health surveys, and these studies are by no means “small or focussed on particular groups”. In fact many of these studies are larger than the present one and with as long follow-up periods.

3. “Aim of the study”: to test the efficacy of sick leave track record (p2 second sentence). “Study hypothesis”: that the sick-leave track record is a strong predictor (p4 second para).However in the conclusion last sentence another “underlying hypothesis” is introduced

4. Last para in intro:

- I still cannot understand why the efficacy of sick leave track record as a predictor must imply similar absence rates initially. However, this seems to be a finding of the pilot study.
- "Ultimately the sickness spell intervals disappear and the sick leave benefit is sooner or later converted into a disability pension". This is a description of the Swedish benefit system, and not a finding of the study.

5. Methods section: The sick-leave track variables should be highlighted and explained better. Information from third sentence of para 2 page 5 should be linked to last para on page 9, which I think would make the readers understand exactly what these variables represent.

6. Limitations of the study: “Strengths and limitations” are mandatory parts of the discussion section. I have asked the authors whether they see any real limitations or biases of this study (except for the lack of data from Northern Sweden), but as far as I understand they have not found any.

7. Second para in background (p3) states that the present Swedish system of transition from sick leave to DP is “ulike the situation in most other countries”. Is that not a problem or limitation with respect to generalisation? According to the authors probably not, since the Swedish system is advantageous from "a scientific point of view". It is not sure that investigators from other countries agree……

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? See above: second “underlying hypothesis should probably be removed.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Yes probably, but methods section should be shortened and more focussed.

3. Are the data sound? Yes

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? No, review of previous literature is superficial and partly biased

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? NO

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes

9. Is the writing acceptable? Yes, but should be shorter, less narrative and more focussed

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'