Reviewer's report

Title: Evidence-based guidelines in the assessment of disability for work: quality of development according to AGREE.

Version: 2 Date: 9 July 2009

Reviewer: Jako Burgers

Reviewer's report:

This paper describes the results of a search to evidence-based guidelines in social insurance medicine in Europe. The authors used the EUMASS (European Union of Medicine in Assurance and Social Security) network for identifying guidelines and the AGREE Instrument for the quality appraisal of the guidelines. From the 33 guidelines identified, only 8 were selected for quality appraisal. These included four guidelines from Germany and four from the Netherlands on similar topics.

Major comments:
- It is unclear why the authors were interested in a comparison of German and Dutch guidelines and excluded the other guidelines in the quality appraisal. This may be due to the similar role of social insurance medicine (SIM) in the healthcare system. However, any description of the healthcare system is lacking in the paper. In addition, there is no discussion on why the number of guidelines is so low in other countries involved in EUMASS. The relevance of the paper would increase if more information is provided about the social and political context of SIM in general.
- The second research question 'to what extent are these guidelines evidence-based' should be changed in 'what is the quality of the guidelines in SIM'? AGREE does not only measure whether guidelines are evidence-based but more than that. The six domains of the AGREE Instruments offers opportunities to provide a more detailed description of the quality aspects of guidelines. Moreover, the term 'evidence-based' is often confusing and misused. I would avoid this term or discuss the limitations.
- Language should be checked and improved by a native English speaker.

Minor comments:

Abstract
The abbreviation EUMASS should be explained in the paper.

Conclusion: too long compared to other sections in the abstract. Focus on key messages.

Methods
- The structure could be improved by adding headings, such as 1) identification
of guidelines, 2) selection of guidelines, 3) quality appraisal of guidelines

- First sentence: four countries were visited. Why these countries and not other countries?
- I have problems with the term 'legal' as opposed to 'medical'. 'Legal' assumes regulation or laws, whereas the guidelines refer to processes and protocols. I would suggest to replace 'legal' by 'non medical' or 'process'.

Results

- Table 1 could include more basic characteristics of guidelines, such as the number of pages and number of references (See for instance Burgers et al. Diabetes Care 2002).
- Terms should be used consistently. The terms medical, disease-oriented, and diagnosis-oriented are used alternately. If these are considered synonymously, one term should be used.
- Table 2 are the mean AGREE domain scores (%). Standard deviation or range could also be provided.
- No quantitative data are provided on kappas. I doubt, however, whether these are useful for this paper.
- Two experts (one for the Netherlands and one from Germany) were asked to comment on the AGREE scores. Why did they not appraise the guideline themselves? This would have increased the reliability of the scores.

Discussion

- Why is agreement on scoring German guidelines smaller than the Dutch ones? An explanation should be added.
- The limitations of the AGREE should be mentioned, such as that it particularly measures the methodology and reporting and not the clinical validity of the recommendations (Burgers, Clin Chem 2006).
- Another limitation is that only two reviewers appraised the guidelines. The AGREE Instrument recommends four appraisers.
- More discussion is needed on the impact of this study on other countries than Germany and the Netherlands.

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 am a trustee of the AGREE Research Trust, which holds the copyright of the
AGREE Instrument.