Reviewer's report

Title: Lung function decline in relation to diagnostic criteria for airflow obstruction in respiratory symptomatic subjects

Version: 3 Date: 10 February 2012

Reviewer: Alistair W Stewart

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript has been well reviewed before my assessment started. It appears the authors have made valuable changes. I have no substantial concerns.

Minor Essential Revisions

The heading to Table 2 is confusing and needs fixing. The heading reports the numbers of smokers and non smokers in one of the 3 categories (and this isn’t stated either). I’d suggest the numbers be removed from the title and incorporated in the body of the table as appropriate.

Discretionary Revisions

One early reviewer was concerned about the interpretation made of Tables 3a and 3b (perhaps earlier versions of these tables). Based on the current tables I disagree with the reviewer and believe that the authors were correct in stating that these sensitivity analyses ‘showed the same picture’. The effect sizes need to be considered along with the P values and the sample sizes. However the authors have acquiesced to the reviewer in the manuscript I have.

This issue of considering the effect sizes needs to be considered when looking at the FVC data in Table 2. The pattern for smokers prebronchodilator and postbronchodilator is rather similar despite the P values giving a different picture. The authors may wish to consider rewording the paragraph at the end of the section ‘Rate of lung function decline’ on page 12.

Page 16 2nd to last sentence. I suggest the end of the sentence should read ‘… a truly representative sample of the primary care patient population with a condition that has the GP refer them.’

The word ‘halve’ used in places throughout the manuscript should be replaced by ‘half’.

Page 15, ‘… elderly subjects, we followed the lower age limit …’ - ‘followed’ should read ‘used’. Two lines later ‘was’ should be ‘were’.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
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'