Reviewer's report

Title: An Investigation of Somatosensory Profiles in Work Related Upper Limb Disorders: A cross sectional study protocol.

Version: 1 Date: 7 December 2009

Reviewer: Domhnall MacAuley

Reviewer's report:

This protocol can be published as it will be a useful reference document if work is subsequently published. But there are significant weaknesses in the study. I do have some problems with the protocol and have doubts about its potential to identify useful information.

The overall rationale for the study is reasonable. But, the authors need to define their aims and specific objectives more clearly.

Method:

It is described as a cross sectional observational study- this is not quite accurate. If the study were better defined, it would be better described as a case control study. But, the groups are very vague and it is difficult to know exactly what the inclusion criteria are. The cases, who will be identified by clinicians, need much more precise description. In a case control study the comparison groups should be similar – but I have doubts that the student and staff population, will be comparable. The cases will be from an aged range 18-65. The age profile of the sample frame of your proposed control group will be very different. You have already stated that they should not spend 40% of their time at a computer. So, irrespective of any clinical findings, the groups are likely to be fundamentally different.

The physical examination, neurological tests and palpation is subjective and will be carried out by the principal investigator- hence there is great scope for bias. When it is suggested there may be a neurological aetiology I am surprised that nerve conduction studies are not included. If these groups are to be compared, the clinical signs and measurements should, as far as possible, be undertaken by someone blinded to the groups.

Non specific arm pain is very vague and, is rather complicated by the inclusion of other disorders. I do not feel the criteria for cases are sufficiently identified. The recruitment strategy is undefined. It would also be important for researchers to estimate how long recruitment will take.

Summary:

This study has, I suspect, already commenced and it is unlikely that the protocol can be changed. I have, unfortunately, significant doubts that this study will produce meaningful results.
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 have no competing interests