Reviewer's report

Title: Prevalence of multi-site musculoskeletal symptoms: a French cross-sectional working population-based study

Version: 2 Date: 26 September 2011

Reviewer: David Coggon

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This is a well-written report describing a simple but informative analysis that will be of interest to others working in the field. My comments all come under the heading of minor essential revisions.

1. Line 1 of the abstract states that “the prevalence of work-related musculoskeletal disorders is constantly increasing”. I cannot find a statement to this effect in the main body of the paper. Moreover, it is unclear what is meant by “the prevalence of work-related musculoskeletal disorders”, given that in general it is not possible to ascribe a musculoskeletal disorder to work with confidence in an individual case. Is the statement referring to the excess burden of musculoskeletal disorders attributable to work? If so, supporting evidence should be presented in the Background section of the paper. Alternatively, perhaps the Abstract could be slightly reworded.

2. In the Results section of the Abstract, and also in the main body of the paper, numbers are presented in square brackets, which I presume are 95% confidence intervals, although this is not explicitly stated. Unless this is a convention of the Journal, it would be helpful to give an explanation when the usage first appears.

3. Page 4, paragraph 1. Here there is statement that “Work-related MSDs are the leading cause of morbidity and work disability in the European Union”. Again, it is unclear exactly what is meant by work-related MSDs. Furthermore, I think across all ages, MSDs unrelated to work are likely to be an even bigger cause of morbidity, and there maybe other illnesses that have even bigger impact. Has the original source been correctly quoted?

4. Page 5, lines 1 and 2. It would be helpful to make clear the denominator for the fractions of 1/3 and 2/3. Is it referring to prevalence in the total population, or to prevalence among people who have musculoskeletal symptoms?

5. Page 7, paragraph 1. It would be helpful to make clear how bilateral anatomical sites were considered. For example, if a participant reported pain in both the right and the left shoulder, did that count as one anatomical site or two?

6. Page 9, five lines from bottom. I think this sentence as worded does not accurately reflect what is shown in Table 2. It is not that musculoskeletal symptoms at a given anatomical site were three to twelve times more frequent among workers who reported musculoskeletal symptoms affecting two to four
anatomical sites. Rather the prevalence of musculoskeletal symptoms affecting two to four anatomical sites was three to twelve times more common in workers who reported musculoskeletal symptoms at a given anatomical site.

7. Page 11, line 3. I suggest this should be “2/3 with multi site…”

8. Bottom of page 11 and top of page 12. Rather than telling us simply that the validity and repeatability of the questionnaire have been extensively studied, it would be helpful to indicate what the studies found. Did it have good validity and repeatability?

9. Page 13, three lines from end. I suggest “conversely” rather than “inversely”.

10. Page 14, paragraph 4, line 2. It might be clear to say “… higher in women than men for …”.

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.