Author’s response to reviews

Title: Low back pain and widespread pain predict sickness absence among industrial workers

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PDF covering letter
Low back pain and widespread pain predict sickness absence among industrial workers

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Point by point response to the reviewers

Reviewer Alex Burdorf:

Ad 1:
We have included a new sentence in discussion, page 13:

A more detailed information about physical load or job titles as surrogate measure of this could have given more information whether the increased frequency of sickness absence was mostly related to physical load or socioeconomic variables.

Ad 2:
Revised sentences at page 7:

An index called widespread pain was constructed as the number of body parts that caused pain. For this index the frequency of pain was dichotomised in no pain (never, seldom, sometimes) and pain (often or very). The index ranged from 0 to 9. High score means frequent pain from many body parts.

Ad 3:
Revised sentences at page 7:

The scores of the items on psychosocial work factors were summarised and transformed into three scales of job demands, job control and social support ranging from 0 (equivalent to “no”, “never” or “do not agree” as the lowest score for various items) to 1 (equivalent to “yes”, “often” or “agree” as the highest score for various items). Thus, higher scores on the three scales represent higher job demands, higher job control and higher social support. The score 1 indicate the best possible score.

Ad 4:
Calculation of job strain and cut off point is now described in an additional sentence at page 8:
The job strain variable was dichotomised by the median as a cut off point.

Ad 5:
Revised sentence at page 8:
Sickness absence both less and more than 12 days could include several short spells.

Ad 6:
Revised sentence at page 11:
Workers between 30 and 50 years and workers with high BMI had a moderately increased risk of long-term sickness absence. Gender was not significantly associated with sickness absence.

Ad 7 and 8:
Additional sentences at page 15:
However, a particular strength of this study is that all the subjects work in the same industry and are comparable for several factors, such as socioeconomic factors and work environment. On the other hand, we have already made a high number of comparisons, and we cannot exclude the possibility that some of the associations found are spurious. Sickness absence in 1998 may be a strong predictor of sickness absence in 2000. We did not include sickness absence in 1998 due to the possible problem of overadjustment.

Ad 9:
We did not have any data on demands for physical fitness, making such an analysis not possible.

Ad 10:
Additional sentences at page 15:
Frequency of MSD and sickness absence due to MSD did not differ between the participants and
the individuals not identified in the second survey.

Ad 12:

A change is done in the following sentence at page 15:

Studies on the reliability and validity of questionnaires on sickness absence have shown that questionnaires might be considered a valuable source of information on sickness absence from MSD, specifically for events of more than 14 days (37,38).

AD 13:

Some conclusions are toned down in the discussion. See point 6,7,8.

Tables:
“Self-reported “ is included in all tables.
Reviewer Istvan Balogh:

Ad I:
The question about smoking is clarified at page 6 (yes – no).
The scale in the MSD questions are added (appendix)

Ad II:
The number of employees off work was not exactly known, but was really small, and was not expected to influence the values in the statistics.

Ad III:
The index ranged from 0-9. This is corrected in the text.

Ad IV:
A comparison of the groups included/not included in the follow up 2000 did not show any difference regarding occurrence of MSD. This is described in an extra sentence at page 15:

*Frequency of MSD and sickness absence due to MSD did not differ between the participants and the individuals not identified in the second survey.*

Ad V:
The percent of total days of sickness absence due to MSD means the percent of all days of sickness absence due to MSD. The workers with no sickness absence due to MSD were not included in this number. We have added this information in table 1.

Ad VI:
We have added a sentence on page 12:
The prevalence of MSD in the aluminium industry is found to be high, and MSD accounted for almost half the working days lost during the previous year among these industrial workers.

Ad VII:
We have included a new sentence in discussion, page 13:
A more detailed information about physical load or job titles as surrogate measure of this could have given more information whether the increased frequency of sickness absence was mostly related to physical load or socioeconomic variables.

Ad VIII:
Additional sentences at page 15:
Frequency of MSD and sickness absence due to MSD did not differ between the participants and the individuals not identified in the second survey.

Ad IX:
We did not change the title as we think this title reflect the most important conclusion in the study.

Ad X:
We still want to use industrial workers in the title, since we think the results are possibly generalizable to other industrial workers.

Bergen 23th July 2003
Tone Morken