Reviewer's report

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

Authors:

Mrs Tone Morken (tone.morken@isf.uib.no)
Trond Riise (trond.riise@isf.uib.no)
Bente Moen (bente.moen@isf.uib.no)
Signe HV Hauge (signe.helene.hauge@hydro.com)
Solrun Holien (solrun.holien@elkem.no)
Anne Langedrag (anne.langedrag@hydro.com)
Svein Pedersen (svein.pedersen.HAL@hydro.com)
Inger LL Saue (inger.lise.liahjell.saue@hydro.com)
Guri M Seljebo (guri.seljebo@hydro.com)
Mrs Varughese Thoppil (tone.morken@isf.uib.no)

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Reviewer: Alex Burdorf

Level of interest: not specified

Advice on publication: Other (see below)

General remarks
Although limited in detail, an interesting dataset with an analysis not often used in occupational epidemiology on musculoskeletal disorders.

Specific remarks

Background
1. Why is physical load not included, since the authors present clear evidence that this may be an important factor? Information on job titles coud be used perhaps to assign crude levels of physical load.

Materials and methods
2. p8, widespread pain index: definiton is unclear since the index combines two elements; frequent pain and number of body parts affected.
3. p8, psychosocial status: I assume that all item scales range from 1 to 3 and that the transformation is just the overall score per scale divided by the total possible score?
4. p9, calculation of job strain: seems not to reflect the cut-off introduced in the statistical analysis
5. p9, sickness absence: both measures of MSD may include both spells!

Results
6. p12: the description of signifiacnt results in tabel 2 should not only focus on the p-value but also on the magnitude, since e.g. age seems to differ little between 30-50 and over 50 years
7. p12, The physical activity could be spurious since almost 60 associations are presented!
8. p12: the design of the study runs the risk that the independent factors do not reflect the true underlying factors. For example, sickness absence in 1998 may predict sickness absence in 2000 and since most sickness absence is MSD, most subjects in 1998 will have had MSD. Thus, it seems appropriate to evaluate whether it really is the MSD in 1998 or the sickness absence due to MSD in
1998 that is the true risk factor.

Discussion
9. p13: demands for physical fitness in relation to job demands: this may be investigated in more detail by potential interaction in the statistical analysis
10. p14. Effect of non-response should be evaluated, e.g. what are differences in baseline characteristics (MSD, sickness absence due to MSD)
11. p14: adjustment for job category is an overstatement, given the very crude classification (blue/white). When there is no effect of gender differences within job class, this statement is too bald!
12. p16: the reliability of sickness absence questionnaires is less favourable is interpreted here, e.g. reference 37 demonstrated a reasonable agreement for sickness absence over 14 days, but less agreement for shorter periods

Conclusions
13. Some conclusions may be toned down, see earlier remarks.

Tables: include in caption self-reported.

Competing interests:

None declared.