Reviewer's report

Title: Determinants of the clinical course of musculoskeletal complaints in general practice: design of a cohort study

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Reviewer: Dr Vincent Hildebrandt

Level of interest: A paper of limited interest

Advice on publication: Accept after discretionary revisions

This paper describes the design of a cohort-study in general practice on the course of musculoskeletal complaints apart from low back pain. For the prevention of chronicity and work disability, this study can produce valuable knowledge to general practitioners and also occupational health physicians to improve their treatments. The description provided is clear and straightforward and the feasibility of a successful study seems large.

Compulsory revisions
Abstract:
It should be written more clearly that the study involves all musculoskeletal symptoms other than low back pain.
Background:
First sentence: the prevalence... please indicate which period-prevalence is meant here.
7th sentence: working population.
Page 4: I miss a reference to the study of Ariens et al, 2000 (Scand J Work Environ Health 26,1,7-19)
Page 8 (sample size): each category of complaint: what is meant with category? I derive from the next sentence that there are 20 categories (2000/100)?
Table 2: the references given for the assessment of physical activity during leisure time do not indicate a measuring method!
Page 9: a discussion is missing of the choices made when deciding on the study-design, the determinants to address and the measuring methods to use. This would make the paper much more valuable. I'm aware of the fact that it will be difficult to limit such a discussion, but a few main issues could/should be addressed here.

Discretionary revisions
Page 5: since musculoskeletal symptoms are often recurrent or chronic, I wonder why each episode which was not presented within a 3 month-period) is considered as 'new'.
Page 7: Mailing procedure: no incentives are built in to ensure a high respons rate. Do the authors really expect that anno 2003 most patients are willing to participate in such a study without any reward?
Table 2: An open question to measure profession/occupation is time-consuming to analyse. An additional, more structured, question on the type of work could be useful. In addition, I suggest to measure - in addition to physical activity during leisure time - also physical activity during working time.

**Competing interests:**

None declared.