Reviewer's report

Title: Musculoskeletal disorders in shipyard industry: prevalence, health care use and absenteeism

Version: 1 Date: 4 September 2006

Reviewer: Kim K. Burton

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a cross-sectional study of back pain in a specific population. There have been many cross-sectional studies of occupational associations with back pain - this study does not add greatly to existing general knowledge, though it offers novel info about its specific population (Greek shipyard employees). Cross-sectional designs are limited in their explanatory power, and these limitations should be reflected in the way conclusions are drawn, the language used, and they should be acknowledged and discussed. The basic study design is OK, with high participation levels. Generally suitable measures are used (though important psychological factors were not included and the self-report of workload is limiting). The 'outcomes' are of necessity retrospective, but cover a useful range ('need for recovery' is novel). I appreciate that English is not the authors' first language, nevertheless some of the language could be made more clear.

Overall, bearing in mind the lack of space constraints for this journal there are data here that may be of interest, but the authors need to revise their interpretation and use the study to generate new hypotheses rather than try to support existing ones.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
1. Since you are dealing with self-reported cross-sectional data and retrospective outcomes, there are severe limitations in terms of explanatory power. Please recognise the limitations in Introduction and Discussion particularly.
2. Stress that what you have found is some 'associations' - whilst statistically we can talk about risk factors, a cross-sectional study cannot confirm their prospective risk/cause potential. Maybe confine yourself to the term associations rather than risk or determinants, and stress that the associations are with previous 'outcomes' (the abstract does not make this fully clear). You should also discuss the substantial limitation of self-reported workload. You might comment on the generally low ORs.
3. Think about a re-write of the discussion to be less repetitive of the results. Try to be more focused. There should be clear discussion of the limitations, and the effect these have on what can really be drawn from cross-sectional studies.
4. You should note that you did not include individual psychological factors.
5. I cannot accept your basic conclusion about interventions - your data simply do not support this conclusion.
6. What new hypothesis (if any) do your findings lead to?

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. Ensure all abbreviations are defined.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. You could omit the first paragraph of Intro.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare I have no competing interests.