Reviewer's report

Title: A cluster randomised control trial investigating the effectiveness of personalised letters sent subsequent to school dental screening in increasing dental registration rates in unregistered 12-13 year old children in South-East Scotland

Version: 1 Date: 26 August 2008

Reviewer: Robert A Baker

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions
None

Minor Essential Revisions
1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   Yes,

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   yes,

3. Are the data sound?
   There is doubt about the numbers of children actually inspected as opposed to the number potentially available to inspect. No figures are given for the number of children excluded due to refusal, parental refusal or absenteeism.
   No comment is made as to whether or not letters were sent to children who were not seen e.g. due to absenteeism but known to be unregistered.
   The abstract suggests that the study took place in 2002/3 [p2] but the Methods part of the study suggests 2004 [p7].
   I have not checked the statistics but they appear correct.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
   Yes,

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
   Yes,
   The authors should mention the Group C letter and its effect upon parental attitude.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Mainly, however the Authors should mention:

• The three month period of the study – was this too short? Could dental treatment have been completed; and the dental estimate sent to and processed by the Board? This was also shorter than previous studies.

• The time of year as holiday periods could influence the results in such a short period.

• Local waiting times for registration / treatment.

• NHS treatment is free for children and that the registration period is 15 months

• Fife and Lothian are separate Boards, having different rates of decay. NDIP reports indicate that 50+% of P1 children are decay free.

• Are these areas urban or rural or a mixture.

• Mention should be made of the differences in the NDIP letters i.e.

  Letter A (High Risk) - severe decay and should seek immediate dental care; or

  Letter B (Medium Risk) - some decay experience and should seek dental care in the near future; or

  Letter C (Low Risk) - no obvious decay but should continue to see the family dentist on a regular basis

• The proportions of children found in these groups A, B & C should be stated.

• The proportions of these groups who did register? It may have been that all the re-Registrants were in group A which would have had value and that all the non-Registrants were in group C.

• The C group letter - does it inspire registration or parents to continue present practice?

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

The authors might wish to mention that Topping is also an author of the NDIP report for 2004.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Yes, although the title is overly long. Perhaps “The effectiveness of personalized letters sent subsequent to school dental screening: a cluster-randomised control trial” would be simpler.

9. Is the writing acceptable?

Yes, however the punctuation needs to be improved. The authors should use hyphens for: “cluster-randomized” and “12- to 13-year-old children”

Several sentences omit full stops [p4x3, p5, p8, p12, p13x2, p14, p15]. Colons should be used for lists [p2, p10]. Lists should be punctuated with commas and full stops [p2, p6, p10].
P5 the authors mean “school rolls” not “school roles”.
P8 line 2 omit files, line 15 “as 2 years would have passed”.
P11 re-registration.

Discretionary Revisions

It would have been a more interesting study if the study had investigated what percentage of children requiring treatment had registered for treatment as a result of the letters.

It would be nice to have totals on the Tables.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I work for Torbay NHS Care Trust which undertakes school dental inspections.