Reviewer’s report

Title: Prevalence and profile of unrecognised palliative patients in hospitals

Version: 3 Date: 27 October 2010

Reviewer: Gerhild Becker

Reviewer’s report:

The manuscript „Prevalence and profile of unrecognised palliative patients in hospital” by Desmedt and colleagues investigated a relevant topic focusing on the frequency of palliative hospital inpatients in general hospitals. The identification of the palliative care needs of hospital in-patients is an important and under-researched topic. A better understanding of the proportion of patients who may benefit from palliative care intervention, the specialties under which they are commonly treated, and their socio-demographic characteristics would be helpful in the planning of services to improve current standards of end-of-life care. As such, the study reported in this paper is interesting and will be of relevance to a wide audience.

I Discretionary Revisions: none

II Minor Essential Revisions:

I would like to recommend some minor revisions:

1) Title
The term “unrecognised” is misleading since the interviewed health care providers were asked to assess whether the patients met the definition of a palliative patient or not. In the title of the manuscript the study design should be explained briefly, because this information is important for the potential reader of the paper. Therefore I would like to suggest to change the title, e.g. “Palliative inpatients in general hospitals – a one-day observational study in Belgium”.

2) Abstract
The abstract is well-written, but some information should be added. The percentage of palliative patients of the total in-patient population (9.4%) should be mentioned not only in the results section but also in the abstract, because this is one of the central messages. The last section is named “discussion”, this should be modified to “conclusions”.

3) Methods
In the methods section it was reported that the study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University, but in this sentence a different writing was used. This should be corrected.
III Major Compulsory Revision:

I would like to recommend also some major compulsory revisions:

Process of randomisation: The choice of hospitals investigated in this observational study and whether this selection is representative for the whole sample is crucial for the validity of results. Therefore the process of randomisation and the choice of the hospitals investigated should be described in detail. How many hospitals were intended to be included in the study, how many hospitals were asked to take part and how many of them refused?

Sample size determination: In the discussion section authors report that a sample size of 300 patients was calculated. How was the calculation done, what factors were taken into account including incidence of the condition being studied, estimated or putative relationship among the variables, desired power, allowable magnitude of type I error etc. This should be explained in the methods section.

Interview: What was the interval between the stay of the patient and the interview of the health care providers? This is important regarding a potential memory bias. It was stated that “a few physicians refused to participate” (page 7). How many refused to take part in the interviews?

Interviewer training: It was stated that the interviewer “exercised in one hospital unit under the supervision of the survey’s conceptor” (page 5). How many interviewers were trained and how many patients were investigated in these training sections? How was the interrater reliability checked?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests