Reviewer's report

Title: A Comparative Analysis of Computer Based Hospice Palliative Care Datasets in Canada

Version: 1 Date: 15 January 2008

Reviewer: Irene J Higginson

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
   The question is well defined, although a number of organizations and groups in other countries have spent considerable time developing central data bases. The question will be useful for Canada where they are planning to develop the data-collection centrally and may well be useful for other countries planning to devise central data sets.

   The paper is largely considered with structure and process data, and it would be interesting to consider to what extent outcome data could be collected, for purposes of audit etc.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
   The methods are clearly described

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
   The data consists of a comparison of the fields in the computer records for capture. As far as I can see it does not consider the degree to which fields were actually completed, and this may be very important. There may be an aspiration for example to record religion, but if in fact it is recorded unsystematically or unreliably then this creates a problem. Similarly, there may appear to be consistency in the fields recorded, but if the fields are interpreted differently in different centers then these will lead to different results.

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?
   The initial part of the discussion is appropriate. This paper forms a useful step towards a central programme. There are also some useful points made about the need for certain data items e.g. place of death. But I think that before a common data set can be recommended there needs to be more consideration of how well data fields are collected. The paper would be considerably strengthened if the authors could obtain some actual (but anonymsed) data from
the centers and considered the completeness of fields, the coding and categories used and the interpretation. This would give a real feel to the feasibility and utility of areas of data collection.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Both the title and abstract suggest to the reader that actual data sets may have been compared. It would be better if both made it more clear that it is actually the computer formats that have been compared, not the actual data sets.

7. Is the writing acceptable?
Yes it is very clear.

Major Compulsory Revisions

I would advise clarification early on that this is only the computer formats which have been compared (in title and early part of abstract it does come in later).

I do feel the paper would be much stronger if the authors could look at actual data. If this is not possible I think there should be a much stronger discussion of the issues that may arise in collecting and recording data, in terms of completeness, reliability, and perhaps a recommendation for a further step in collecting such data to assess comparability.

There should be some discussion of the potential of data sets to record outcome data

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

I found the section on the clinical variability of the data collected especially interesting. Could the authors expand on this, giving more examples and considering the potential utility of such data? This might link to the outcome data mentioned above.

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: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'