Reviewer’s report

Title: Determination of French influenza outbreaks periods between 1985 and 2011 through a web-based Delphi method

Version: 3 Date: 8 October 2013

Reviewer: Michael Stoto

Reviewer's report:

1. The authors use innovative and appropriate methods to study an issue that I have not seen addressed in a formal way, and get some interesting substantive results. In particular, from my point of view, the main finding is a demonstration of just how hard it is to define the start and end of a flu outbreak.

2. In the end, though, this strikes me more as the beginning of a research project than as the end. It’s of very little interest to define the limits of a flu season once it well over the the data are all in. The hard part is deciding on any given date, knowing only the data available at that point, whether the season has started (interestingly, as noted on ll. 344-347, a few of the experts tried this, but were regarded as outliers). A more interesting piece of research, for instance, would take the current results as the gold standard, and look at how well either experts or standard decision rules determined the start of the outbreak with data presented in real time.

Minor essential revisions

3. The only thing that was not clear was ll. 186-189 in the methods section. In particular, were the experts aware of the other experts’ views in round 2 and 3, as you would expect in a true Delphi survey? Were they told what their own answers were in previous rounds?

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.