Reviewer's report

Title: Factor Analysis of Common Somatic Symptoms: A Preliminary Study

Version: 1 Date: 4 November 2009

Reviewer: Peter Verhaak

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
A well articulated research question is lacking. However, by their introduction the authors suggest that they are interested in the way somatic symptoms cluster together, which may be indicative for somatisation disorder.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
638 individuals are included who attended a one-day physical examination. Symptoms of these individuals are assessed by questionnaire.

The quintessential of somatisation disorder is the frequent attendance and help seeking for medical reasons, where a physical explanation for the disorder is lacking.

In this study patients are not attending a doctor for help seeking reasons, but for a general health check, therefore, the critical characteristic of help seeking without a medical reason is lacking.

Secondly: patients are seen once, the number of symptoms is not assessed (or at least not reported) therefore the critical characteristic of frequency and abundance of symptoms is lacking as well.

Thirdly: The possible physical explanation for the symptoms is not considered.

What remains is a trivial inventory of symptoms that ordinarily cluster together in the general population, an exercise that has been performed many times before.

3. Are the data sound?

Factor analysis of the data produced 4 factors, suggesting clustering around the themes “pain”, “cold”, cardiopulmonary” and “gastrointestinal”. It is a common finding in population epidemiological research that these are the most common factors, one may find.

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 discussion is completely about somatisation disorder where the data cannot learn us anything about somatisation disorder.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
No, see the already mentioned objections.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes, but they are building upon work on somatisation disorder while their data are about common symptoms in an open population.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The title is correct. But the content overrules the title.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
Yes

Major Compulsory Revisions:
A straightforward research question should be added.
This research question cannot relate to somatisation disorder, for the data do not allow any conclusion about somatisation disorder for the reasons stated above.
The paper should be restricted to conclusions about symptoms, clustering together more than expected by coincidence.

Discretionary revisions:
Table 1: These characteristics are not taken into consideration in the rest of the article, except for gender. Mentioning their distribution makes only when these distributions of the patients involved are compared with e.g. national data, allowing for conclusions about generalization of the results. If reference data about a certain variable (e.g. religion) are not available, the results about the distribution of the variable can be omitted, because these data are not used in the article.

Table 2: is difficult to read. Readability would be increased if for instance only a percentage "agree" was presented.

**Level of interest:** An article of insufficient interest to warrant publication in a scientific/medical journal

**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.