Reviewer's report

Title: Socioeconomic inequalities in health services utilization in Brazil according to health care need: Evidences from the World Health Survey

Version: 1 Date: 4 May 2010

Reviewer: Anastas Philalithis

Reviewer's report:

General opinion on the paper
The paper by Szwarcwald et al is overall interesting and informative. However it requires revisions in certain aspects, particularly in the presentation of the methods and in the discussion and conclusion. Also, the tables and figures should be more informative and “self-explanatory”. The language is generally of good standard and well understood, but English language editing is required.

Specifically:
1. The paper presents the results regarding health services utilization from the World Health Survey in Brazil. Although similar papers have been published from other countries, little is published in the international literature about this issue from research that has been carried out in Brazil, one of many “emerging economy” countries in the world. As such, it is of interest.
2. One finding that is particularly interesting is that socio-economic status is related to health care utilization in those with better health, while in those with worse (self-reported) health status, there is no statistically significant difference. This aspect deserves to be even more highlighted, and various explanations could be put forward, that would require further research and/or analysis of the data available.
3. The methods section in the abstract should give information about response rate and whether the sample corresponds to the demographic structure of the population at large (see later comment)
4. The conclusion of the abstract could propose that the explanation maybe inappropriate over-use of the health services by those in the better socio-economic group (also see later comment).
5. In the introduction section, there are too many references to published papers, without a clear statement of the special points of interest that the authors found useful in each. (This is a discretionary revision).
6. The sentence “the right to health is a responsibility of the Federal Government” needs revision. Is it meant to say that the Federal Government is responsible for providing health care that fulfils a universal right to health?
7. The methods section should give some more details about the sampling framework, the response rate, whether the demographic structure of the sample
(and other aspects, such as socio-economic status, if available) corresponds to the demographic structure of the population at large. This is important to judge the representativeness of the sample. This might have been reported in previous publications by the authors, but this is probably in one of the Portuguese language publications that are not accessible to a wider readership.

8. Also, some information on the representation of different geographic regions in the sample is required. Brazil is a vast country with large areas that are sparsely populated!

9. What is implicit stratification?

10. Was it a face-to-face interview? Who were the interviewers and how were they trained?

11. How was one adult “randomly selected” to answer the questionnaire?

12. Do health expenditures (last line of page 5) include social health insurance and out-of-pocket payments as well as private health plans?

13. “Health services utilization was established by use of outpatient and inpatient health care services in the 12 months prior to the interview.” There is no reference in the discussion about the recall bias and failure to remember all instances of health care utilization, that is a known feature of self reported measures of health care usage. This is a limitation of all similar research.

14. p 9, third paragraph: The only aspect of the higher use of health services by the wealthy who report better health that is discussed, is that the poor miss out on prevention. This might be correct. However, there is no evidence presented that the wealthy make more use of preventive services. Another, additional explanation maybe that the wealthy make more inappropriate use (abuse?) of the health services. Some more comments on this are required, and it is a topic that justifies further analysis of the data available (in a further paper) or, if not available, further research to explore the issues raised.

15. p 10, top of page: The issue of geographical distribution is an important issue that requires more in depth discussion. Could it be that the poor sections of the population are those that live in the more sparsely populated areas of the country, who have little access to health services, and hence they only seek the advice of health professionals when they are feeling (seriously) ill?

16. p 10, last two sentences of the discussion: Although essentially correct, these two sentences could be strengthened as suggested above.

17. The last paragraph of the conclusion could also make a stronger statement about this finding.

18. All three tables and the figure should have clearer titles, and explanatory legends should be added.

- Improve the titles
- Add number of respondents.
- Is there a statistical difference between the groups in table 1 (a chi square test?)
• Explain what IHA is

19. Figure 1 requires better legends, so that it is understood without referring back to the text of the paper.

Some points for language editing

• In the title: Evidence, not evidences
• In the results of the abstract:
Instead of: the poorest use less frequently health services, despite they present worse health conditions.
Suggested text: the poorest use health services less frequently, despite the fact that they present worse health conditions.
• In the conclusion
Instead of: It was evidenced that...
Suggested text: The evidence shows that...
• In the introduction: comprehensive attention, NOT Integral attention
• p 9, second paragraph:
Instead of: “despite they had a fair or poor self-rated health, or had their health care needs unmet”
Suggested text: “despite reporting fair or poor self-rated health, or having unmet health care needs”.
• p 9, third paragraph:
The sentence “the analysis showed that weaker is the need the sharper is the socioeconomic gradient in health services utilization” requires a comma after need: “the analysis showed that weaker is the need, the sharper is the socioeconomic gradient in health services utilization”
• p 10, in the conclusion:
Instead of: It was evidenced that...
Suggested text: The evidence shows that...
• p 10, in the conclusion: suggested text: despite the fact that they present worse health conditions.
• p 12, the contribution of authors: G. N. Damacena participated…

Reply to specific questions
1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   Yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   Methods require revisions as indicated above
3. Are the data sound?
Yes

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 and conclusions require revisions as indicated above

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
   No – more information is required on the representativeness of the sample, and an appropriate comment in the limitations.
   Comments on response rates and recall bias are required

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

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
   The title is accurate, the abstract requires some revisions

9. Is the writing acceptable?
   Yes – with additional editing
   Issues of misconduct are not raised

Final recommendation:
Accept for publication, provided the major compulsory revisions are carried out.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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