Reviewer's report

Title: "Done more for me in a fortnight than anybody done in all me life." How welfare rights advice can help people cope with the practical demands of cancer.

Version: 1 Date: 3 March 2010

Reviewer: Astri Syse

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions

Overall:
The paper is informative and easy to read, and adds valuable information on how persons who seek advice view their financial situation and how they perceive the difficulties they encounter regarding claiming benefits. In my opinion, however, the authors want to conclude further than this, and also appear to make suggestions for changing practice in the health and welfare system based on interviews with these 22 individuals who differ widely. I do not necessarily disagree with their suggestions, as I believe they are sound, but I do not think they are appropriately or sufficiently supported by the data and design applied here. If the authors would be willing to consider this and modify aims and conclusions accordingly, I believe the paper is clearly publishable.

Answers to questions from webpage:

1. The research question is well defined, but the conclusions drawn appear to reach beyond the study design and the data available. It is not entirely clear whether the authors have an agenda to "change practice" that this study in itself may not justify. In the backgrounds section, 1st sentence, I miss a specification of that this is true for the UK, and I also miss another sentence on how this is in other countries, with appropriate references. Likewise, I miss further references to other populations and a specification of that this is true for the UK in line 1 and 2 page 5.

2. The methods appear adequately chosen, and well carried out. I miss, however, a statement of how many persons consented to partake in interviews and thus made up the sampling base (p. 8).

3. The data appear sound, but as this is a qualitative study I feel that the authors "stretch" their significance in interpretation of findings. There are only 22 participants, and it is unclear how many there were available (see 2 above). The only persons interviewed are those accessing advice, so it should perhaps come as no surprise that they state that they experience economic hardship (1st sentence in results section in abstract). It is also a wide variety of persons regarding cancer diagnosis and prognosis (stated as "recruited in a variety of ways"), as well as age - which may make it difficult to generalize findings. The authors state that cancer affect persons disproportionately across different social
strata. This is correct for cancers associated with life style factors such as smoking (e.g. lung cancer), which presents at later ages when the carcinogenic agents have had time to do harm. For other cancers that hit "early" (one usually claims below 50 years of age) and cancers such as breast and thyroid included here, this does not seem to be the case. This could perhaps be clarified (p. 5). It is also only one "carer" included, and this could be more clearly stated.

4. The reporting is good. Some very minor issues are addressed below, but they are entirely up to the authors to consider. The tables are informative, but I do miss a comparison of the sample and the sample base, as well as with the number of participants seen by advisors (792).

5. The discussion and conclusion could be revised to acknowledge the limitations of the data (size and variability of cases) and design, as suggested above. In particular, I miss such discussions on page 22, paragraph 2 where a reference to the size would be appropriate. It should also be noted in the discussion and conclusion that the only persons included (eligible) are those who accessed welfare advice. This is likely to result in a skewed view on financial strain and stress after cancer. Norwegian studies, for instance, show that earnings on average go down only 12% - and that for some cancer forms no declines may be seen (Syse et al, 2008). I also miss a more in depth discussion of the role of gender: We know that due to the cancer forms hitting persons of working age, around 2/3 of cancer survivors in the age group 35-59 are females. As females more often than males are not the main breadwinners, focus should perhaps be on males more than females in the service provision? We have recently shown that for married couples, cancer in men affect the household more adversely than cancer in women because the absolute income decline is much larger for men, but also because women's incomes go down as they care for their husbands (Syse et al, 2009).

6. The aims are clearly stated. However, I believe that they may be too wide and "all-encompassing" for the design and data available. Perhaps they could be made more specific (i.e. limited to the UK), and limitations of the approach chosen could be further discussed. I also miss suggestions on how the generalisability of these findings may be tested in other studies with other designs.

7. The references pertain to the UK, which is fine if the conclusions are to be limited to the UK. As of now, I miss references to other populations with other welfare systems, as well as research on how incomes are affected in other societies. There is much existing research in this field which is not cited here. One example is a recent review by Taskila et al.

8. The title is good. The abstract is adequate, except for what has been noted in 3, 6, and 7 above.

Minor revisions

Very minor issues:
a) Health care is spelled health care and healthcare in abstract/paper. Please choose one.
b) Should increases be replaced by increase line 7 in abstract?
c) Should reduces/improves be replaced by reduce/improve in line 4, paragraph 2, in background?
d) I am not a native English speaker, but I feel there are a few commas missing in the paper (perhaps about two per page) that would improve readability. Could you please check?
e) Unsure about the use of the word appropriate two places page 7. Please check if better words are available.
f) Sentence unclear (could be simplified): "Some health related benefits are means tested, although not AA and DLA. All other benefits are means tested and there is a complex...".

Other comments:
9. The writing is acceptable. The paper is interesting to read, and I particularly enjoy the sample quotes provided in the results section. I also like the "structure" of the paper very much. It is very well organized.

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

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.