Reviewer's report

Title: Sick-listed employees with severe medically unexplained physical symptoms: burden or routine for the occupational health physician? A cross-sectional study.

Version: 1 Date: 11 April 2010

Reviewer: Chris Burton

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1. methods contains two tables 1 & 2. Tables belong in results and anyway they contain far too much detail (much of which appears to have been reproduced from an earlier paper).
2. The measures section contains details about several measures which are not relevant to the research questions.
3. The use of chi-squared tests is overly simplistic. I would have expected the use of logistic regression which could give a meaningful odds ratio with 95% confidence intervals rather than just a p value and could be adjusted for covariates.
4. Results: the authors indicate that they found, in their earlier paper, that patients in the severe MUS group had a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety. The finding here that the OHPs are more likely to want to refer them to a psychiatrist or psychologist begs the question whether that need is related to the presence of depression or anxiety. This could be tested within a logistic regression model.

Discretionary revisions

5. Overall I think the choice of two groups based on a cut off of 15 on PHQ15 is not ideal as many patients with scores in the 10-14 range will have multiple MUS. I would have liked to see the distribution of PHQ15 scores of all patients in the study. I can’t help wondering whether the reason that the OHPs did not see these patients as particularly difficult was because they saw them as part of a much larger group of people who can’t work because of symptoms.

This is in keeping with emerging evidence that all symptoms - whether we can “explain” them or not – are the result of biological, psychological and social processes and are amenable to similar interventions (eg CBT). Perhaps by treating these patients as “people who can’t work because of symptoms”, the OHPs are actually being quite sensible and those of us who see them as having MUS are missing the point!

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I am co-author with one of the authors of a Cochrane review of treatment for MUS.