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: 29 April 2010

Reviewer: Mark Gabbay

Reviewer’s report:

Hoedeman et al
Sick Listed employees with MUS: burden or routine for the occupational health physician? A cross sectional study.

Question
My main issue with this paper is that the core message isn’t clear enough, and I don’t see how it is likely to influence practice outside the Dutch system as it’s currently presented.

I assume this is an analysis of a subset of data from a larger study (ref 5) but this isn’t made clear from the paper- which it should be. If it is a unique study, then the arguments for the development of the question, and relevance of the answer are not well made. The 3 questions presented are not well worded. I assume the first relates to relative workload- as appointment lengths were recorded and compared- but if it’s complexity of the case (which is a truer reflection of the issue), then perhaps a more robust measure of this should have been undertaken. Question 3 is in fact a series of questions covering the consultation, referral and communication, and needs isn’t defined.

Methods
These are well described, but it’s not clear why it’s the OHPs who are being assessed for burnout and work engagement rather than the sicklisted patients they are seeing- as I would be more interested in that measure wrt sicklisting decisions. I think there needs to be a bit more information about these scales and how ‘real engagement’ is defined and some validity/reliability background information.

Results
These are rather brief, and need editing for clarity and English for e.g. the 2nd sentence of the final paragraph on page 3 The OHPs experienced task difficulties…- is not easy to understand even on repeated reading. Re table 4, it’s not clear what needs are being considered here. Is it a referral letter from GPs, or access to GP records, or the opportunity to discuss cases with the patient’s GP? The authors acknowledge this point themselves in the discussion- but then don’t help the reader, and didn’t go back and undertake interviews or seek clarification from the OHPs.
Discussion

The key points are addressed, but the International significance of the findings are unclear. The OHPs are only tasked with making sicklisting decisions, and the Dutch system (which isn’t fully described) seems to have some common elements with lowland and some Scandinavian countries, but the authors rightly point out that they do not have to make decisions regarding treatment or referral etc so it’s not surprising that they seem less concerned about the MUS aspects than GPs who are having to consider these key issues as well- this is the most likely explanations for the findings. However the reliance on the limited quantitative approach leads to a very speculative discussion with no clear explanation of the key findings. If there are interview or other qualitative data then they should be included in this paper, and the length of it could be justified. If not then I recommend a much shorter summary paper reporting an interesting finding with no clear explanation. I think these findings are interesting and worth publishing, but a clearer thread of the arguments is essential, greater clarity of the writing (editing for English) will help. It needs contextualising as to whether part of a larger study- make this clear if so, and if not, then why were these questions formed and why was there no attempt to collect qualitative data to understand what they observed and inferred from the quantitative results? As it stands the findings are easily dismissed with a ‘so what’. If the authors address this then the paper should be published, otherwise it’s a short- ‘unexpected finding- no clear explanation’ report. I think that with reflection and revision, and if available other data added this paper should be published as a full paper, and I would be happy to read the revised manuscript.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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:

No competing interests. I work within the area of interest academically, but am not publishing directly in the same area.