Reviewer's report

Title: Patient safety in out-of-hours primary care: a review of patient records

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Reviewer: Trevor Sheldon

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This paper describes a study which examines the patient safety risks associated with out-of-hours primary care in the Netherlands. This is one of the first to do this and it is of significance because of the general view that there might be more risks associated with out-of-hours care, both because of the quasi-emergency nature of the requests for medical consultation and the lack of continuity of care.

The question posed is well defined and the methods are appropriate and well described. The data are clearly presented and appropriately analysed (though see comments on presentation below). The discussion and conclusions are well balanced and adequately supported by the data. The authors also acknowledge the weaknesses of the study, although on the whole I think the paper is robust and worth publishing.

I have suggestions for minor though essential revisions which I think would strengthen the paper:

1. The paper compares results for the out-of-hours cooperatives and day time primary care – though not in the same practices (I think). Why did the authors not look at both day-time and out-of-hours care in the same practices using the same methods in order to get a more reliable comparison?

2. More information could be provided about the nature of the GP cooperatives in the Netherlands. It is likely that this differs from other countries, so information to judge the generalisability is important.

3. The methodology of this study is good however there are a few points I would like clarified. I think they should justify the use of a final year medical student in the first phase review. What sort of training did they have for this stage and what did the investigators do to ensure the reliability of all the judges before being used.

4. The inter-rater reliability was assessed and was respectable. However no attempt was made to assess the false positive and negative rates. Could this be done? I do not think this is essential but might add to the quality of the methods and confidence in the findings. For an example of where this is done see: Sari AB et al. Extent, nature and consequences of adverse events: results of a retrospective case note review in a large NHS hospital Qual Saf Health Care 2007;16:434–439. doi: 10.1136/qshc.2006.021154.

5. Please clarify whether near misses were included in the definition of an
incident, I presume not, but it is not clear. I do not like the references used to justify their definition (18 and 19) on page 5, there are more international ones which are used more reliably. If different definitions are used perhaps they should be justified in relation to those used in other main internationally published studies.

6. The authors refer to a tool which is not published in a refereed journal (ref 21 and 22); I think they should only refer to material easily accessible in the public domain and which has been through independent scrutiny (maybe ref 23 is enough). If not then we need to see more information to be able to judge the features and reliability of the tool.

7. The statistical results (page 8) should show the analysis (e.g. in a table) and the confidence intervals (CIs) for the various parameters in the regression. Also table 2 should have confidence intervals and/or tests of difference around the incident rates.

8. In the discussion the authors refer to the higher risk of safety incidents in older patients. This has recently been shown by: Sari AB, Cracknell A, Sheldon T. Incidence, preventability and consequences of adverse events in older people: results of a retrospective case-note review. Age and Ageing 2008; doi: 10.1093/ageing/afn043.

9. The paper needs some minor editing to correct the English (e.g. page 11 3rd paragraph, “probability to experience an incident” should read “probability of experiencing an incident”.

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:

I declare that I have no competing interests