Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation of an open access echocardiography service in the Netherlands: a cohort study of indications, outcomes, patient management and trends

Version: 1 Date: 28 May 2009

Reviewer: Gianfranco Damiani

Reviewer's report:

An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Major compulsory revisions:

1. In “Background” section, authors presented quite clearly the findings of some relevant studies about the impact of open access echocardiography services. But there is no reference of the paper “Impact of specialist care in patients with newly diagnosed hearth failure: a randomized controlled study” Rao A, Walsh J. Int J Cardiol. 2007 Feb 7;115(2):196-202. The authors may discuss shortly the evidence reported in this article.

2. In “Methods” section it is reported that a questionnaire on management by the GP was used: please give more details about the questionnaire (structure and items). Some methodological elements should be clarified:
a) the questionnaire was sent in 2007 but information can also refer to previous five years. Did authors control for a “memory effect” on any question? Was the requested information all available in the GP’s electronic patient record?

b) no explicit reference on any formal validation procedure (Cronbach’s alpha, Spearman-Brown Split Half Coefficient or others) was reported. On the contrary in the “Strength and limitations of the study” authors write “The questionnaire response rate was high (82.7%) indicating good validity”. A high response rate doesn’t ensure validity of questionnaire but only absence of selection bias. Authors should better explain this topic.

3. Authors selected first and last 250 patients: could you please explain why you have chosen this sample size?

4. Authors didn’t make adjustments for some confounders like age, gender and others. To assure the comparability between the two groups authors should apply a stratified analysis and/or at least show clearly the two samples composition by an added descriptive statistics table

5. Table 3 is not quite clear. Specifically the sum of percentages concerning “Advice” is not 100. Is there any other kind of specified advice that is not reported in the table? Is each kind of advice (“refer to cardiologist”, “repeat echocardiogram in x years” and others) not mutually exclusive?

Minor Essential Revisions

In the paragraph “Strength and limitations” of the study on page 13 at lines 3-4, the authors write: “However, in some echocardiography reports no information was given about certain structures or functions”. Could you please clarify the essential message of this sentence?

Discretionary revision:

No discretionary revision is needed

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests