Reviewer’s report

Title: Urgent referral for suspected cancer as a means of reducing delay in the diagnosis. A population-based observational study in Denmark

Version: 4 Date: 25 January 2013

Reviewer: Nafees Din

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to re-review this manuscript. The authors have addressed some of the issues raised in my previous review. I would like to point out a few issues that in my view have arisen after the revision and clarification of the manuscript

1. Major Compulsory Revisions

Main body of text

Method

Sampling procedure: As the patients were recruited from a database at two time points because of some sampling issues described by authors in detail, this is in that respect a retrospective database study and the patients having complete records/information about their referral and treatment only were analysed into two cohorts. Hence, we cannot regard all the patients that were identified from the database as the study population; rather these are the patients who were ‘screened for eligibility/inclusion’. The study population is principally the patients who were ultimately analysed, so the numbers in methods/results as well as in Figure 1 should be amended accordingly and properly labelled (i.e. patients screened for eligibility/inclusion; excluded because of GP non-response; excluded by the GP [with reasons]; and number analysed etc.).

Results: The authors compared all the other hospitals that contributed to the patient population with one hospital (Vejle hospital) and even compared this hospital with all the others combined. These analyses look to be biased for the following reasons:

• Vejle hospital had implemented this protocol long before its national introduction when the other hospitals started following this protocol. In that case, this analysis cannot be justified because the two groups are not comparable
• The sample sizes in two groups i.e. Vejle and all other hospitals combined differ markedly which makes the comparison invalid

The authors did not give any justification why did they want to single out one hospital than others because the aim of the study was to find out the effect of national initiative of urgent referral on secondary care interval, not the comparison of Vejle hospital with all others, which makes it look as if the authors are biased towards this hospital. If they want to make a point about this hospital, I would make a suggestion here: The analysis should be performed with all the
hospitals individually and if the Vejle hospital shows marked differences in secondary care intervals than all the other hospitals (and possibly one hospital doing better or badly than others, which would be an interesting finding in its own right), this point could be discussed with all the merits in the discussion which the authors have already done to some extent.

2. Minor Essential Revisions
Following are some comments/suggestions to improve the quality of the manuscript. The typos in the manuscript have been underlined and suggestions made in ‘---’ in the order they appear in the paper.

Abstract
Method: Numbers need to be amended as suggested above in main body of text. Analyses plan need revising in line with the above suggestions.

Main body of text
Method
Third paragraph is repetition of what has already been described in introduction about the GPs’ role
Discussion
Main findings: Typo in paragraph two, first sentence ‘…initial symptoms…’
Strengths and weaknesses: Typo in first paragraph ‘…impels…’
Third paragraph” Second sentence needs rephrasing as does not seem correct grammatically and hard to understand
Fourth paragraph: The discussion about a randomised trial in this context is probably ethically not correct so better leave that paragraph out as it does not add anything.

3. Discretionary Revisions
Main body of text
Method
Last sentence: Use of STATA needs reference
Results
First sentence:
Should read ‘…patients were screened for eligibility or inclusion etc…’ not ‘….included…’ because all of these patients were not analysed or had complete data as this is not a trial but a database study so 6518 was the actually population that was analysed.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests