Reviewer's report

Title: Epidemiology and performance indicators for occupational health services

Version: 2  Date: 20 April 2014

Reviewer: Jill Stocks

Reviewer's report:

1. This paper seeks to address an important topic within countries with well-developed occupational health systems and within Europe, namely the optimum way to use routinely collected, electronic, occupational health and safety data to monitor and improve the health and safety of the worker. A pragmatic approach is taken whereby epidemiological and performance indicators are identified by various stakeholders. The majority of the indicators originate from a publication undertaken by a European consortium and hence this work is of relevance to many European countries. Given the lack of standardisation of OH data across companies and countries this is an important step forward.

Discretionary revisions

2. Title probably reads better with “epidemiology” replaced with “epidemiological”

3. Has this approach been taken anywhere besides Belgium? If not it is worth mentioning that it is the first time such indicators have been evaluated systematically.

4. The authors clearly have an a priori hypothesis about the likelihood of internal and external OHS providers judging an indicator to be relevant, the reason for this expectation should be stated as it is not clear to readers who are unfamiliar with the Belgium OHS system.

5. P3 typo “internal respectively external”

6. P4 “The incidence of traditional occupational diseases such as pneumoconiosis, lead poisoning and hearing loss has decreased in developed countries. Simultaneously, however, the incidence of work-related musculoskeletal and psychosocial health problems has increased [15]” These statements are not backed up by facts provided in reference 15. Is it known that the incidence of hearing loss has declined in developed countries?

7. P7 “mobbing” is this expression sufficiently well understood or would another term be better?

8. P9 Add reference number for Kreis and Bödeker

9. P13 Below is a very important point and I would suggest it is moved up higher in the discussion and included as one of the major findings in the abstract.

“Despite the limitations, this study shows that it is possible to provide a comprehensive, factual and qualitative snapshot of the state of occupational safety and health by means of the registration of data. If well designed, a uniform
report for all European countries can be developed. Yearly reports can also present valuable information with respect to sectors identified and discussed as being most at risk.”

10. It would be useful to see a list (as a supplementary file) of all 1100 indicators with a brief reason for inclusion or exclusion at this stage as readers from other countries considering the same approach may need to adapt the indicators to their particular situation.

Minor Essential Revisions

11. The abstract does not clearly state the aim of the paper or explain what an indicator is. The description “validation of the indicators” does not explain what this entails or means. Perhaps less emphasis on the numbers and more emphasis on the type of indicator would be helpful, the number of indicators evaluated, chosen etc is not a very important result compared with the type of indicator identified.

12. The most important step of the project is the screening of the 1100 indicators resulting in the selection of 257 used in the feasibility study. More information should be provided about this process, any systematic rules applied should be described and the number and type of expert, user and stakeholder should be described. This should be done such that the reader can form an opinion about potential bias introduced at this stage.

13. P8 The respondents to the survey should be described eg the organisations they represent and the proportions/numbers from the different organisations. Was there just one respondent per organisation? This also applies to the experts discussed above.

Major Compulsory Revisions

None required

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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