Reviewer's report

Title: The requirement for prior consent to participate on survey response rates: a population-based survey in Grampian

Version: 2  Date: 24 September 2003

Reviewer: PHIL EDWARDS

Reviewer's report:

General

1. This study addresses an issue of great importance to health research using self-administered postal questionnaires that is shown to impact on the validity of research results: the need for prior consent to be contacted by researchers.

2. The authors show that when survey research is conducted that incorporates a prior-consent stage the overall response rate may be reduced to one-quarter of that expected without a consent stage, thereby reducing the effective sample size and reducing the precision of study estimates.

3. The study is well-designed and allows comparison between postal and email questionnaire methods

4. There is a thorough analysis of the characteristics of respondents and non respondents, and a good use of graphs and figures.

5. There is a thorough discussion of the results, the possible reasons for low response after a prior-consent stage and the implications for future health research.

6. This paper makes a valuable contribution to survey research literature as more and more researchers are facing up to the realities of data protection and confidentiality legislation.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None identified.

Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

None identified.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

None identified.

Advice on publication: Accept without revision
Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests: None.