Reviewer's report

Title: Identification of ambiguities in the 1994 chronic fatigue syndrome research case definition and recommendations for resolution

Version: 3 Date: 14 August 2003

Reviewer: Niloofar Afari

Reviewer's report:

General

This is a first revision of a manuscript addressing some of the ambiguities of the 1994 CDC research case definition of CFS. The authors have been responsive to many of Dr. Afari's discretionary and compulsory revisions, and have attempted to address Dr. Merz's revisions in the cover letter. I appreciate the authors' willingness to address some of the discretionary revisions. In agreement with the authors, I believe that the manuscript is now stronger and a better fit for publication. Unfortunately, I cannot speak to the revisions requested by Dr. Merz and the authors' response.

I do have one substantive comment in the following category:

Major Compulsory Revisions

Although the authors state in the cover letter that the language recommending the use of the SPHERE to assess the 8 minor symptoms of CFS was deleted, that recommendation still stand in para 2, page 8, Section Definition and Evaluation of Accompanying Symptoms. The authors continue to recommend that "research studies use the SPHERE (discussed below) to query subjects (cases and controls) about the occurrence, duration, and severity of the 8 case defining symptoms and other potentially accompanying symptoms." In fact, pages 8-9 are complex and difficult to follow. I recommend deleting or moving para 3 (about SF-36 and SIP) which appears to be out of place. I further suggest toning down the recommendation for using the SPHERE in para 2 (e.g., can use SPHERE for lack of a better instrument, as one of 2 or more choices such as the CDC symptom checklist, and urge researchers to work on standardizing and validating an instrument to assess the symptoms). Para 2 can then be combined with para 4 ("the group was not aware..."), followed by Para 5.

Again, I appreciate the authors' willingness to revise their manuscript.

Advice on publication: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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