Reviewer's report

Title: Variation in recommendations of national guidelines for chronic heart failure across Europe and their relationship to clinical practice A comparative analysis of guideline content and target versus the IMPROVEMENT survey of prescribing performance in primary care.

Version: 2 Date: 1 March 2005

Reviewer: David Rosenthal

Reviewer's report:

General
This manuscript addresses the role which national guidelines play in contributing to differences between heart failure management in different nations. Given the magnitude of the clinical problem of heart failure, and the consequent public health interest in optimizing care of heart failure patients, the authors have selected a timely and important topic. Unfortunately, I do not believe that the methods are adequate to answer this question.

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

Firstly, the authors need to more clearly specify the methods by which recommendations were compared and grouped. This is likely to have been a very subjective process, and the manuscript does not provide adequate detail of how this was conducted, and what principles were invoked to assure consistency in this critical step.

Secondly, the authors need to decide how to address the variability in time of publication as a factor influencing the results of the comparison. For example, a guideline published in 1994 might be viewed by practitioners as irrelevant, whereas a guideline from 2003 might not yet have entered broader awareness. This factor might be equally important as the content of the guidelines. In a similar vein, the site of publication and means of dissemination of results might influence the utilization of the guidelines.

Thirdly, the statistical analysis is not clear and needs to be specified in much greater detail. The reader cannot tell how the comparisons were made, nor how "agreement" with the guidelines was determined. Without this information, the results cannot be interpreted with confidence.

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

Figure 1 contains pairs of horizontal rows for each category, rather than a single stacked row. I cannot find adequate explanation of this in the legend.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Given the many factors which stand between the publication of a guideline and the implementation of clinical practice based upon the guideline, the authors might wish to consider any of the following in their revision: where the guidelines were published; whether clinicians were aware of the documents; whether clinicians agreed or disagreed with the documents; whether conflicting guidelines from other nations were available to the clinicians and whether they might have influenced their practice; and whether there was temporal migration of practice patterns independent of the guidelines.
What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes

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