Author's response to reviews

Title: An analysis of patient house calls in the area of Attica, Greece

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Athens, July 31, 2006

To: Alexander Pemberton, BMC Health Services Research

Re: Revision of manuscript MS: 1165076523105626 - An analysis of patient house calls in the area of Attica, Greece

Dear Dr. Pemberton,

On behalf of all co-authors I would like to thank you for your consideration of the paper and the reviewers for their thoughtful comments. We modified our manuscript based on their suggestions. Our point-by-point responses to their comments and corresponding modifications of our paper are the following:

Reviewer #1# (Sarah B. Laditka)

General
This study provides a descriptive analysis of house calls provided by physicians in a medical company in Greece, over a recent 5-year period. The results suggest that house calls are provided more frequently to older people, and during hours in which most physician offices are not routinely open. The findings also describe the types of diagnoses treated. In sum, the study provides useful descriptive information about physician house call services. I offer several "discretionary" revisions and "minor essential" revisions for the authors to consider that would enhance the presentation.

We thank the reviewer for her comments.

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Major Compulsory Revisions
(None mentioned)

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Minor Essential Revisions
1. The authors should provide some motivation for their study period. That is, the authors should provide some reason for why they selected the 5-year time period; for example, this is the most recent data available.

Indeed, the reason that we selected the studied 5-year period was that it was the most recent period of available data. This statement was added in the revised manuscript (page 4, paragraph 3, line 4).
2. Table 1: the authors should show the results for their bivariate analyses, the p-value, for each comparison group in the table, such as age, sex, period of the day, and so forth.

We added a statement regarding the results of the statistical analysis in the footnote of the table: “All comparisons of the distributions of the studied variables had statistical significance with p<0.001.”

3. Figures 1, 2, and 3: In the results section, the authors should clearly and concisely describe the main findings for each of these figures.

We have added further description of the main findings for each figure, in the results section, as suggested (For figure 1: page 5, paragraph 4, lines 7-10; for figure 2: page 5, paragraph 4, lines 10-14; for figure 3: page 6, paragraph 2, lines 8-11).

4. I encourage the authors to continue to polish the language as they finalize the manuscript, and ensure that there are no grammatical errors. For example, in the last sentence of the 4th complete paragraph of the Introductory section, the first instance of "of" should be "for".

We thank the reviewer for his suggestion. We tried to further improve the language of our manuscript. (Also, “of” was replaced by “for” page 4, paragraph 1, line 3)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. It would be useful to describe trends in utilization over the 5-year period, that is, house calls per capita. This type of information would help to show whether the use of house calls provided by SOS physicians has changed over the period of the study, and may suggest changes in the frequency of use of physician house calls.

Although we tried to retrieve annual data, unfortunately there was no information regarding the population of the area of Attica for each of the years 2000-2005 separately. The Greek population census takes place every 10 years. The last population census took place in Greece on March 18, 2001, and, according to that data, Attica was inhabited by 3,894,573 citizens [www.geohive.com/cntry/greece.php]. Therefore, it is not possible to further describe the trends in utilization over the 5-year period for specific subsets of population”. This clarification was added in the manuscript (page 8, paragraph 2).

2. It would be helpful to comment on any major demographic changes in the population of Attica. Has the population grown? Have there been changes in the age distribution of population in this area, for example, is the population aging? This type of information helps to put the study in better context.
Unfortunately, the lack of yearly population data prohibits the extraction of safe conclusions regarding the interesting issues that the reviewer has appropriately mentioned.

3. More information about characteristics of SOS physicians, particularly their specialty, would be useful. In this regard, I suggest that the 5th complete paragraph in the Discussion section, beginning with the sentence, "There are some characteristics" to be moved to the final portion of the Introductory section.

This material provides useful context for the study.

Modifications were made based on the reviewer’s suggestion (The 5th paragraph in the Discussion section of the previous version of the manuscript was moved to the final portion of the introductory section: page 4, paragraph 2, as well as, information regarding the medical specialties was added: page 4, paragraph 2, lines 5-6).

4. It would be useful for the authors to clarify why the annual data, shown in Figure 3, is not shown in Figures 1 and 2.

We believe that the presentation of 5 separate curves within each figure may introduce complexity in the presentation of the data without offering significant additional information. We would like to ask for the understanding of the reviewer not to follow this particular suggestion.

Reviewer #2 (Igor Svab)

General

This is an overview of emergency services in an area of Greece. The SOS services obviously try to maintain some continuity of emergency services. Unfortunately, the design of the study does not permit to assess these interesting organizational aspects.

We thank the reviewer for his comments.

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

1. Organization of PHC in Greece in relation to house calls needs to be more clearly described. It seems that the services are split between in-service hours and out-of-hours.

We added a paragraph that includes that information suggested by the reviewer: “The major provider…” (page 7, paragraph 5).

2. It is not clear whether the doctors see their own patients or not.
We clarified this issue in the revised manuscript (page 4, paragraph 2, lines 8-10).

3. The home visits that are declining throughout the world are the ones that are mostly the ones done during regular hours by personal doctors. Emergency services are another organisational form and the distinction should be made.

We incorporated this statement in the discussion section of the manuscript (page 7, paragraph 4, lines 8-11).

4. The conclusion is very weak: what is the recommendation from this study? The last sentence may be true, but I failed to see the evidence for it in the data.

We rephrased the concluding statement of our manuscript: “Although our study…” (page 8, paragraph 3, lines 8-14).

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

(None mentioned)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

(None mentioned)

We would like to thank again the reviewers for their instructive comments that have substantially improved our paper. After revising the manuscript based on their suggestions and preparing it according to the journal style, we hope that it is now acceptable for publication in *BMC Health Services Research*. We would be glad to make additional modifications, if needed.

Sincerely,

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