Reviewer's report

Title: Symptom experience, self-assessed health and mortality: results from the West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study

Version: 1 Date: 1 October 2006

Reviewer: Peter A Bath

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting paper that examines the hypothesis as to whether symptom burden is a better predictor of mortality than self-rated health. It undertakes a series of analyses similar to that of an American study published in 2005. The paper is well-written, and provides clear tables and a concise but complete description of the results in the paper.

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

None.

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

On page 9 of the manuscript, first paragraph, the authors suggest that there "was a strong linear relationship between number of reported chronic conditions and mortality". The authors should re-consider the use of the word "linear", and consider omitting it, as although there is a relationship, the Hazard ratios from one to two to three to four plus chronic conditions do not appear to increase linearly.

Page 9, paragraph 3. Sentence 2. The authors suggest "there was no clear trend in any of the categories". Assuming that they mean going down a column for each variable, do they mean "categories" or should this be "variables"? This could be re-worded as "there was no clear trend across the categories" or "there was no clear trend in any of the variables with increasing number of symptoms"

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Although the authors have considered a range of publications in their review and discussion, these are predominantly studies outside the UK. Given reported cross-cultural differences in the meaning of self-rated health (SRH) and its relationship with mortality, it would be useful for the authors to compare their findings with those from UK longitudinal studies, e.g., the Melton Mowbray Ageing Study, the Nottingham Longitudinal Study of Activity and Ageing (NLSAA), where differences have been found according to cohort, gender, the precise variable used to measure SRH, and the length of follow-up period. See a special section in the Gerontologist Volume 43, Number 3, June 2003 for further details. The authors could also check whether the reported prevalence of self-rated health in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) has yet been published provide a more recent comparison.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.