Reviewer's report

Title: Referrals from general practice to consultants in Germany: If the GP is the initiator, patients' experiences are more positive

Version: 1 Date: 28 September 2005

Reviewer: Steve Kisely

Reviewer's report:

General
This is potentially an interesting paper on determinants of satisfaction around referral to specialists from the points of view of patients, family doctors & consultants. There are a number of methodological problems that need to be resolved prior to publication.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
1) A description of the German health system in terms of organisation, how services are paid for, and the exact role of family doctor as gate-keeper. e.g. can patients refer themselves directly to specialists?
2) A description of how the authors first selected the original survey items from which they derived their predictors in their analysis. Were they derived from previous work?
3) It is unclear how the information on who imitated the referral was derived, as data from the three types of participants were not linked. Was it the patient? If it was how we know that in cases where it was the patient (as opposed to the family doctor) who initiated the referral, ill-defined or somatoform symptoms may have been more likely. In this case, greater consequent dissatisfaction when patients rather than family doctors were initiating the referral may have been due to consequent dissatisfaction when no organic cause was found.
4) It's also unclear as to when the survey was done – after how many subsequent specialist visits did it occur. Was it during or at the end of treatment by the specialist?
5) Table 1 should be divided into separate tables for GP, patients & specialist characteristics.
6) The discussion should consider in more detail, other explanations for the association between family doctor-initiated referral & patients' satisfaction such as #3 above.

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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)
On a minor point there are a number of spelling mistakes & the paper could benefit from the involvement of someone familiar with English idiom

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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: No