Reviewer's report

Title: Doctor-shopping in Taiwan: A Socio-cultural Factor in the Spread of Emerging Infectious Diseases?

Version: 1 Date: 1 February 2006

Reviewer: Arul Earnest

Reviewers report:

General

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

1. Chen and colleagues have written an interesting paper in relation to the healthcare help-seeking behaviour of Taiwanese patients. Generally, the paper is well-presented and the sample size in their study is large, leading to robust estimates.

2. The major deficiency of this study is that it is entirely descriptive in terms of help-seeking behaviour, and does not relate the issue of doctor-shopping with the spread of emerging infectious disease, as their manuscript title seems to suggest. The title needs to be changed.

3. Doctor-hopping does seem to present the opportunity for an infectious disease such as SARS to be spread across healthcare institutions. However, the authors have not provided convincing data to support this theory. The authors should share their experience in Taiwan during the 2003 outbreak. What is the help-seeking behaviour of SARS patients who transmitted to secondary cases as compared to those who did not transmit. The answer to this question should provide more evidence to support their theory.

4. In addition, it would also be useful to compare the previous help-seeking visits/physician switching behaviour of those presenting with influenza-like illnesses (and other infectious diseases) and see if they are different from the entire cohort (or a suitable comparison group). This would help examine the issue on a broader scale.

5. The authors should highlight the Taiwanese public health measures implemented during the SARS outbreak and discuss their impact on patients’ help-seeking behaviour. i.e. what were the institutional mechanisms kept in place to prevent the spread of the disease within and across institutions? For instance, in Singapore, ‘SARSWeb’, a secure website containing updated lists of suspect and probable SARS cases, community, HCW and inpatient contacts of SARS patients, including those on home quarantine orders (HQO) was set-up, together with isolation, contact tracing and quarantine procedures (see James L and Deng JF, Public Health journal, Jan 2006). See also Gopalakrishna G, EID journal, Mar 2004. The authors should discuss the impact of these measures on doctor-hopping behaviour during an outbreak of an infectious disease.

6. I have noticed the absence of infectious disease as a category in the list of ambulatory care visits (table 1). It would be useful to have this in the table, and also a breakdown of their help-seeking behaviour. A breakdown by several key diagnosis groups would also be helpful.

7. The issue of super-spreaders surfaced during the recent SARS outbreak, where a few infected
individuals transmitted the disease to many others. The authors need to discuss this and other competing risks in disease transmission. This study also lacks clinical data, which has been shown to be related to disease transmission.

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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)

1. The authors have presented means and standard deviations for the number of consultations. The distribution of some of the data looks skewed (e.g. standard deviation of 13.7 for a mean of 13.4). It would be better for the authors to present medians and interquartile ranges instead.
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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 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