Reviewer's report

Title: Utilization of the out of hours service in Poland: an observational study from Krakow.

Version: 1 Date: 27 February 2008

Reviewer: David Dunt

Reviewer's report:

This is a well written study. It presents a study of a deputizing service that provides out of hours care to 61 practices and a population of 420,000. In so doing it gives a nice picture of the pattern of out of hours service use in a large city which may well have relevance outside of Poland. Its analyses include the effects of age group and distance from the ambulatory clinic, as well as time of day, week and seasonality.

It was good that the authors in their discussion acknowledged the importance of telephone triage in out of hours care and why it does not currently exist in Krakow at the present time. They also acknowledge the importance of type of illness (ICD-10) in understanding out of hours use.

The authors need however to identify some limitations on the study beyond the ones they do in their discussion already. These should be fully acknowledged in their discussion.

Major Compulsory Revision

1a) The deputizing service is apparently only one of a number of unspecified others providing out of hours care in Krakow. The distribution of users of the these services within Krakow is very unlikely to be random. So it is important to know what was the distribution of users of at least the index deputizing service and their likely characteristics (socio-economic, ethnicity etc) and to what extent these characteristics might differ from those of Krakow overall.

Minor Compulsory Revision

1b) Similarly, a little more on the characteristics of health care system in Krakow would help NB the role of Emergency Departments in out of hours care of disease/trauma suitable for GP care. Also the characteristics of residents of Krakow more generally would help non-Polish readers in judging to what extent the authors' findings might be applicable to their own circumstances.

2 Major Compulsory Revision

The above point is important because we have no information about the users of the out of hours service other than their age (not even sex) and the distance of the general practice that they use for in-hours services from the ambulatory clinic. This is important as it is very probable that characteristics, such as
socio-economic status, ethnicity, in-hours GP clinic type as well as type and severity of illness will have an effect on out of hours service use. On this point I believe their analysis of age could be improved by focusing on particular age groups rather than mean age (as use by age follows a U-shaped distribution.)

Major Compulsory Revision

3 From the limited data on users and their health needs, it is difficult to judge the appropriateness of their use. While data on the effects of distance on service use may well indicate overutilisation in users who live close to the ambulatory clinic, it can just as much indicate underuse in users who live far away. I feel therefore much of the last paragraph of the discussion (abusers repeated prescriptions or health certificates) is unsupported by the findings and not really appropriate. Unnecessary overuse of out of hours services by a few is certainly a problem but I would guess that the recent opening of citywide deputizing services would be regarded by the population of Krakow as a boon. The challenge is to design services that move routine service use for minor episodes of illness to in-hours. For example, though possession of a home telephone has been low in Krakow, most GP home visits presumably follow a telephone call-out. Many deputising services in other countries have telephone triage facilities which aim to deal with minor illness episodes over the phone and so minimise GP home visits.

Minor Compulsory Revisions

4 The number of figures and tables I believe could be trimmed without undue trauma to the paper.

With attention to these points the article could make an important contribution.

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, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.