Reviewer's report

Title: A national survey of services for the prevention and management of falls in the UK

Version: 2 Date: 24 June 2008

Reviewer: Finbarr MARTIN

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the details of the assessments and interventions provided through UK based specialist services for the prevention of falls in older people, and to compare these services against explicit standards set out in national evidence based guidance published by NICE, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

The method was by structures telephone survey with persons in the local health service (manager or clinician) who represented themselves as suitable to provide this information. The specific items of inquiry were set by the contents of the NICE guidance. There is an ambiguity in the meaning of the words “service” and “clinic” which are used somewhat interchangeably. This may reflect the lack of clear definition of either, in the health services, and thus a flexible approach by the authors to what was the relevant activity locally to be included in the survey material was probably the right approach, to enable inclusivity of relevant activity, as judged locally.

The response rate was fairly high for a survey of this type, 76%. The fact that this work was commissioned by the government funded National Institute for Health Research through the coordination centre for Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) would likely have increased participation. Self report of services without mechanisms for validation introduces possible local variation in interpretation and bias. It seems likely (to this reviewer) that this would act in the direction of suggesting more rather than less adherence with national standards, thus resulting in overall overestimates of national rates of adherence, but the authors are not able to assess this.

The manuscript is generally clearly written and indicates the additional available explanatory material on a website. The conduct of the study appears to have been to a high standard.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. The Introduction describes a little about the care pathways for falls prevention set out in NICE. This states that ... a multi-factorial assessment should be carried out in older people who report a fall in the last year ... but NICE is less inclusive than this suggesting that ... a multi-factorial assessment should be carried out in older people who report a fall in the last year and are assessed to have gait and balance problems (or multiple falls). This discrepancy influences the results in a
minor way in that the relevant table (1) does not present the data about eligibility criteria in accordance with the NICE guidance criteria.

2. The discussion is generally clear and makes points relevant to the findings and the purpose of the study. There is one exception to this which is important. In Key Points 3 and in the final paragraph of the discussion, the authors draw attention to the weakness of the evidence base underpinning the current guidance about conduct of falls services, (and by implication therefore the NICE guidance) and suggest that further investigation through RCTs is necessary. This may be true but is not a conclusion of this survey which was not about assessing the evidence base, and therefore this statement if included should be a discussion point not a conclusion.

3. The references are presented in an inconsistent style. Reference 15 is wrong, the text refers to a different audit in the same series, for which the correct reference is http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/clinical-standards/ceeu/Documents/fbhop-nationalreport.pdf

Discretionary revisions

4. Further, the key point 3 statement that further improvement in falls services should (where possible) be in the context of randomized trials is not a conclusion of this work but an opinion of the authors, based on their careful though separately reported systematic review of the research literature.

5. There are several typos which will be seen on rereading the draft.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am the co-author of a national audit of a similar subject to which the authors do make reference. I doubt this amounts to a conflict of interest.