Reviewer's report

Title: Prevalence of serious mental illness among Tibetan refugees: A systematic review

Version: 1 Date: 16 August 2005

Reviewer: Kristy Sanderson

Reviewer's report:

General

This article reviews the published and unpublished evidence for prevalence of mental health problems among Tibetan refugees. Confidence intervals were calculated for prevalence rates, and a narrative description of each is provided. Mental health of refugees is a topical and important issue, and this review should be of interest to those working in this area.

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

1. Discussion and interpretation of results: The authors state that their findings indicate a "far higher" prevalence in their population of interest than in most refugee populations, citing a recent review in the Lancet. An adequate discussion of whether this is likely to be a real difference is not provided. The Lancet review only included studies that used diagnostic case finding tools. Such tools were not used in the studies included in the present review (with the exception of Servan-Schreiber). Thus it is quite plausible that the apparent difference is due to measurement differences, as symptom scales such as the HSCL will give higher "prevalence" rates than case finding instruments. To illustrate, a comparison of the Servan-Schreiber study which provided psychiatrist-identified cases of PTSD in children was very similar to the rates of PTSD in children reported in the Lancet review (11.5 vs 11%). An additional qualifier is that the studies used small samples, which tend to yield higher rates than larger studies.

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

2. Title: The five included studies assessed depression and anxiety symptoms, and in three studies, PTSD, with most using symptom scales. "Serious mental illness" is too strong a description. The authors might wish to change their title to reflect what was actually measured; "depressive and anxiety symptoms" accurately describes both the disorder types and use of screening scales to identify these symptoms for most of the studies.

3. Methods: Methodology is appropriate for a systematic review.

4. Results: For completeness, the authors should provide the prevalence in the control populations used in Holtz and Crescenzi.

5. Data presentation: I do not think the Figures are essential, given there are only a handful of studies, and the estimates present rates from single studies. I would prefer Table 1 to be the main source of results.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions.

**What next?:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests.

**Level of interest:** Acceptable

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.