Reviewer's report

Title: Minor psychiatric disorders among Brazilian ragpickers: a cross-sectional study

Version: 1 Date: 31 October 2005

Reviewer: David Parker

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General
This is a very interesting article and may be one of the few that has ever been published that examines the health of “rag” pickers. At times the background lapses into issues that might be construed as obvious. For example, the authors write, “Mental illness may not, in itself, be fatal but it causes extensive disability in rich and poor countries alike…” This sentence could be omitted. The list of risk factors for minor psychiatric disorders is very broad to the point of providing little insight to the reader and much of the second paragraph in the background section might be considered for omission. Similarly, the section on the number of working people and those who are unemployed ought to be omitted or brought back to the paper in a manner that is more clearly connected to the outcomes of interest. In sum, the background section often veers away from the point of the manuscript and needs to be more directly focused on work and psychiatric disorders.

In the methods section, there needs to be more clarification of the economic levels A-E. A small table would be helpful. This is particularly important since economic levels are used as part of the analysis. In addition, there ought to be a clear definition as to what psychiatric conditions are under consideration in analysis. It is also a bit confusing when alcohol use is discussed. This reviewer is not certain if alcohol abuse and other substance abuse are considered a psychiatric condition under DSM III. If this is the case it might call for some re-analysis.

I recognize that the population under study is difficult to reach and evaluate. However, it is often unclear as to what is antecedent; psychiatric conditions or rag picking. My own experience is that the conditions of rag picking are one of the most extreme of work environments. While anecdotal, it appears those individuals who are marginalized (i.e., pre-existing pathology) may find rag picking a last-resort occupation. This is aptly noted by the authors in the discussion.

In addition, is it minor psychiatric and psycho-social problems that are importance to this population? Are there more serious conditions that are more germane? In particular with regard to the mental health of rag pickers what are the serious conditions that are faced by this group of workers and are they evaluated in the survey that has been used? More discussion of the limitations of the survey would be helpful.

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

The background should be more focused on the topic of rag pickers. Study limitations should be more clearly discussed.

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

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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