Reviewer’s report

Title: Rate of first recorded diagnosis of autism and other pervasive developmental disorders in United Kingdom general practice, 1988 to 2001

Version: 2 Date: 6 March 2004

Reviewer: Paul Whiteley

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General

The article by Smeeth et al reporting on the increase in numbers of diagnosed cases of pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs) in the UK follows a number of previous studies examining this issue (including previous studies completed by the authors). The originality of the paper relies on the use of the GPRD to examine temporal trends of PDD in a wider range of subject numbers than has previously been applied. The main finding is an increase in numbers of cases between 1988 and 2001 (with the main comparisons made between 1991 and 2001). The methodology used is sound and the analysis and reporting of data on temporal trends of diagnosis derived from the GPRD are accurate and well-described. The discussion and conclusions made by the author are supported by the data.

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

None.

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

Two points should be brought to the author’s attention.

1. The author has made a number of references to a paper by Croen et al (2002) (reference 6) regarding the changing prevalence of autism in the state of California, USA. As the authors are aware, this paper examined data from the DDS regional centre system in the state of California. Croen et al suggested that a process of diagnostic substitution, from patients previously diagnosed with “mental retardation” to a diagnosis of autism, was a primary reason for the increase in cases of autism. The authors will also be aware that a number of analytical errors were subsequently brought to light regarding this paper (Commentary: Blaxill, Blaskin & Spitzer on Croen et al (2002) The changing prevalence of autism in California; JADD 33(2)) which although were discussed by Croen et al in a subsequent article (Response: a Response to Blaxill, Baskin & Spitzer; JADD 33(2), were not properly resolved. To quote Croen “.diagnostic substitution does not appear to account for the increased trend in autism we observed in our original analysis”. As such, the authors should exercise caution when using this reference as an indicator of changes in diagnostic practices accounting for the increase in numbers of cases of autism.

2. I was intrigued at the discrepancy in results obtained by the author for the West Midlands area in comparison to the data reported by Powell et al (2000) (reference 22) based directly on child development centre data. I wonder if perhaps the author may wish to stress the need for further validation of the GPRD method of analysis when applied to PDD given such disagreement?
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None.

Which journal?: Appropriate or potentially appropriate for BMC Medicine: an article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

What next?: Accept for publication in BMC Medicine after minor essential revisions

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

Employee of the Autism Research Unit at the University of Sunderland, UK.