Reviewers report

Title: Persistence of primary care consultations for non-specific physical symptoms in children: a cohort study

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Reviewer: david champion

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1 As stated by the authors, this study has provided new prospective evidence that persistent and frequent consultations for nonspecific physical symptoms (NSPS) are influenced by consultations for NSPS in their mothers. They have added to the incremental growth in knowledge about prevalence and consulting behavior in families for NSPS. Little new information has been gained about genetic, or psychosocial causation of the familial associations and nothing has been revealed about consulting attitudes. However the methods were good and well described. The prospective design, the use of documented physician consultations and other strengths as presented in the discussion tend to offset the relatively modest contribution to family studies of NSPS.

2 The research question was well defined. Originality resides mainly in the methods. The data were clearly presented and appropriately analysed. The interpretations were well balanced, supported by the data and were not overtly biased. The acknowledged weaknesses were modest and do not invalidate the conclusions. I did not have any particular problems with the tables and figures. I shall comment on some of the writing and specific content below.

Abstract:

3 I thought about “non-specific physical symptoms” used in the title, abstract and generally. On initial deliberately naïve thinking, the term does not convey much meaning. However on consideration of various definitions, alternatives and usage patterns, I could not come up with a more explicit term. The authors, with epidemiological expertise, have evidently considered it carefully.

4 “Evidence suggests that parental health and consulting behavior is related to the child…. Is not really clear. Meaning? What kind of relationships?

5 The use of “persistent” in the abstract and text generally to me doesn`s seem quite to fit the finding that the median number of consultations for NSPS in the 2 year period was 2 (range 1-12).One dictionary definition was “continuing to exist or occur over a prolonged period” which might be OK, but the list of synonyms suggested that persistent should describe greater frequency.. This is only a small point of English but has importance related to it`s wide use in the paper. I wondered if “repeated” might be better, but would not be insistent. Perhaps editorial consideration might be helpful.

Background:
6 Citations related to epidemiological studies in families and causal influences could helpfully include Kröner-Herwig B1, Gassmann J, van Gessel H, Vath N. Multiple pains in children and adolescents: a risk factor analysis in a longitudinal study. J Pediatr Psychol. 2011 May;36(4):420-32. Studies have been recently emerging with evidence for common heritability of non-specific and chronic pain disorders, but the authors limited statements about genetic influences is the reality of the current situation.


Methods:
8 One child per family was selected and the reason explained. In retrospect, it would have been interesting to have selected a nearest sibling which might have provided some genetic inferences. (Hopper JL et al. Does eczema in infancy cause hay fever, asthma, or both in childhood? Insights from a novel regression model of sibling data. J Allergy Clin Immunol 2012; 130: 1117-1122).

Results:
9 It is not conventional to commence a sentence with a numeral.
10 The repetition of results (Analysis data) in the text when also in the table is often considered not needed. Editorial comment on that would be helpful.

Discussion:
11 The comments made about genetics and prognosis could be equally or more relevant here.
12 “Such research may shed light on effective management strategies to prevent persistent and frequent consultations for NSPS in children” could be misconstrued as suggesting that preventing consultations is the main objective. I know what the authors mean, but perhaps this sentence could be better expressed. Generally the discussion was good.

No major compulsory revisions.
Minor essential revisions: 4, 9
Discretionary revisions: 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12

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

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.