Reviewer's report

Title: Accuracy and completeness of mortality data in the Department of Veterans Affairs

Version: 2 Date: 21 December 2005

Reviewer: Karl Lorenz

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an important report for clinical and health services researchers who have an interest in US veterans' mortality. The study has been conducted to answer important questions for such researchers in a straightforward and helpful manner. The description is generally lucid and direct. I think this paper will be frequently sought out and referenced by the research community.

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

None

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

1. With respect to the order with which you introduce your datasources and the results, I'd suggest putting them in a similar order – it's a little hard to follow the different datasources and that might help a bit.
2. The last sentence in paragraph 1 beginning “Between inpatients and non-users…” is a little unclear, perhaps out of place because the comparison is a bit different from the inpatient / outpatient comparisons discussed in the rest of the para.
3. In the discussion, it is worth enlightening readers on how time intensive and resource intensive these different strategies are. What was the cost of obtaining the data from NDI vs. doing in house with VA data? Are the 4 VA sources readily available? It is also worth noting again that this study lagged NDI for 2 years –, what is the timing of updates on the various data sources? And when data is needed on mortality for operational or research purposes with a shorter timeframe, how might that affect the strategy of ascertainment? These are questions not answered by your research, but I think that readers will be implicitly asking themselves these questions and you are more informed than anyone to speculate.
4. Table 6 is unclear as a standalone table unless it is compared carefully with the text. Can you clarify the row labels somehow so that readers can glance at it and comprehend it?

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. In the background, although it isn’t necessary per se, in the interest of drawing in readers, it might be worth mentioning that other researchers who are not directly in the VA might also have an interest in understanding veteran mortality ascertainment. For example, studies of the urban homeless, Medicare studies (which from verbal report of colleagues, are missing data on an important minority of their cohort – thought to be in VA, etc…)  
2. The methods are appropriate and clearly described. While it isn't necessary to this report and the
authors may be working on this as a separate report, it would be of interest to know how mortality ascertainment differs for different population groups (e.g., by race/ethnicity, etc…) Because the VA is equal access and a fair bit of such research may look at differences in mortality, it would be worth knowing whether this issue has greater or lesser implications for such analyses.

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**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 have no competing interests.