Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 30 November 2005

Reviewer: William F Page

Reviewer's report:

General

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

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. I think it would be good to expand the discussion a bit on some of the limitations of your data, such as requiring Social Security Number (SSN) and date of birth. Researchers who study veterans who served prior to the 1970, for example, might be following subjects using name and military service number, rather than name and SSN.
2. Also, I would have found it easier to identify the sources if some had different names: Social Security Administration Master Death File (SSADMF), for example. This would also reduce potential confusion about this being a VA data source, when the original data arise outside the VA. Having a footnote in the tables "translating" the abbreviations would also have been helpful.
3. Finally, a very small point, but I do believe that VA data systems have one clear advantage over the National Death Index in identifying deaths outside the United States. Did you encounter any such deaths in your study?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

4. I would find it interesting to do a simple capture-recapture estimate of the total number of deaths in the sample. The usual capture-recapture estimates require the assumption of independent ascertainment, which would be a consideration here.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest 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:

My organization, the Medical Follow-up Agency, makes use of VA mortality data in many of its studies and has studied the completeness of VA mortality reporting in the past. The publication of this study could conceivably stimulate further interest in this subject.