Author's response to reviews

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

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Author's response to reviews: see over
March 6, 2006

Dear Mr. Mathers:

I am pleased to submit to you a revised manuscript (ID: 2189692348531334) titled “Accuracy and completeness of mortality data in the Department of Veterans Affairs.” All the comments except for discretionary ones were addressed and the manuscript was revised accordingly. At the end of this letter, I am attaching a file that shows item-by-item responses to the reviewers’ comments.

Please feel free to contact me should you need any additional information from me.

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Responses to the Reviewers

Reviewer’s report William F Page

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.

Revised according to the suggestion. See pp. 13 – 14.

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.

Revised according to the suggestion. See p. 14 (List of Abbreviations) and Tables 3 – 6.

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?

The location of death is not separately identified in either BIRLS Death File or in Medical SAS Inpatient Datasets. We thus could not identify any deaths outside the U.S.
Reviewer's report- Dr Karl Lorenz

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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 data sources and the results, I'd suggest putting them in a similar order? It's a little hard to follow the different data sources and that might help a bit.

Revised according to the suggestion. See p. 11 (first paragraph). This was the only place where the order in the results section did not match the order in which the data sources were introduced.

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.

Revised according to the suggestion. See p. 11 (2nd paragraph).

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.

Revised according to the suggestion. See p. 13 (3rd paragraph) and p. 14 (Conclusions).

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?

Row labels (see p. 24) were revised to make them clearer.