Author's response to reviews

Title: Length of Patient-Physician Relationship and Patients' Satisfaction and Preventive Service Use in the Rural South: a cross-sectional telephone survey

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RE: MS: 4149917862342549- 'Length of Patient-Physician Relationship and Patients' Satisfaction and Preventive Service Use in the Rural South'

Dear BioMed Central Editorial Team:

Thank you for reviewing our manuscript, 'Length of Patient-Physician Relationship and Patients' Satisfaction and Preventive Service Use in the Rural South'. Below we have addressed the reviewer comments in a point-by-point response. We feel the manuscript has been made stronger by responding to the reviewers' points, for which we are grateful.

General Comments:
Reviewer 1 notes that that the choice of literature is biased and the selection process not declared. Although we are well familiar with this literature, this paper is not intended to provide a systematic review of the entire continuity-of-care literature. The literature in the Introduction is cited to make the points that physician continuity has been viewed as important (paragraph 1), has been measured in many ways and associated with sometimes positive but sometimes negative outcomes (paragraph 2) and elements of trust and satisfaction, although not 'hard medical outcomes', are also important and may differ by length of the relationship (paragraph 3). Reviewer 2 suggested adding two references by Freeman, which we have pulled and incorporated in the introduction.

Review 2 notes that the paper is too long for an observational study. We are not aware that write-ups of observational study designs should be shorter than those of true experimental designs. In fact, given the greater threats to validity of observational study designs we feel that it is particularly important to provide enough details in the methods to demonstrate the integrity of the study. Even with providing these details, the manuscript is only 2562 words long.

Methods:
Reviewer 1 states that the original sample number is not reported. In our methods section page 5, under 'Study population' we described the sample surveyed as 4879 persons and the participation rate was 51%. For further clarification, in the paper we have added a sentence to the methods under 'Study population' (page 6): "The overall participation rate was 51% (4879 participants and 4682 refusals)."
[Of note in a random digit dialing telephone survey, there is not an 'original sample number'. Instead, numbers are randomly called from all phone exchanges within each area code and for each number block (i.e., consecutive numbers within each exchange, e.g., 919-966-4200 through 919-966-4299) with at least one active phone number. Batches of numbers are randomly generated within these active number blocks]
by computer, and all numbers so-generated are then called. Many of these numbers will be found to be non-active (i.e., a telephone company recording says "you have reached a number that is not in service"), and some will be ineligible because they are business numbers or fax machines. When all numbers in a batch have been called, a second batch of numbers is generated and called, and so on.]

Reviewer 1 also states that the sampling procedure within one family is not described enough. We used the next birthday method of respondent selection as described by Salmon CT. Public Opinion Q. 47; 1983:270-276 and we have cited this reference on page 6 of the Methods section. Essentially, random sampling was conducted by having the person who answers the phone list all adults living at that household who have lived in the area for at least 12 months and who speak English or Spanish. Then the person who answered the phone is asked which of the eligible adults has a birthday coming up next. That individual is the targeted respondent, and if s/he is not the person who answered the phone, the interviewer asks to speak to that individual. If that person refuses to participate, that individual and household are counted as non-respondents.

Reviewer 1 notes that the nonrespondents deserve a description or comparison to the final sample. We don't have characteristics of non-respondents or people not reached, as telephone numbers/households were not drawn from a list of known individuals/households. As is standard in random digit dialing telephone surveys, we identified unequal group participation rates by comparing respondents demographically to the known characteristics of the area's population, using census data. We then weighted analyses so that the grouped respondents within each state demographically matched the adult population within eligible counties within that state as described in the last paragraph under 'Analysis' on page 8. We have added a sentence stating that our survey participation rates were lower for males, persons 18-39 years of age, African Americans, and those with household incomes below $15,000, when compared with 2000 US Census figures.

Reviewer 1 notes that the division in the continuity subgroups is unclear (1 year or less, 1-2 years, 3-5 years and more than 5 years). We analyzed the data using these divisions because there were the four possible responses that participants could provide to this question. We clarified this point under the 'Eligibility' subsection on page 6. We analyzed the data according to the grouped data we had, although we do not think that these particular groups create any particular problems.

Review 1 asks why the researchers invented their own satisfaction questions. In fact, the satisfaction questions were all taken from previous surveys and a published study, including the Community Tracking Study Household Survey, Medical Expenditure Panel Survey and Penchansky and Thomas 1981. We have clarified this point in the 'Satisfaction questions' subsection of the manuscript page 6 and added these references.

Results Section:
Reviewer 1 asks for the response rate, which we have reported in the methods section (51%).

If we understand correctly, Reviewer 1 asks us to report means or percentages of the responses to the satisfaction questions. The percentages of the satisfaction questions are already reported in the Results section, second paragraph on page 9, as well as in Table 2. In order to make this clearer, we have changed the title of Table 2 to include the term 'satisfaction'.

Reviewer 1 recommended breaking up the symbols '<' into '< or =' or use one as appropriate. We agree and have made these changes in the statistical reporting of the results in the manuscript.

Discussion:
Reviewers 1 and 2 recommend a more critical discussion of the study's strengths and weakness, and possible confounders. Therefore, we have added this to the last paragraph before the Conclusions, mentioning the issues of response rate, generalizability and shortcomings of telephone interviews.

Reviewer 2 states he missed comparison of this study with other studies of satisfaction. We have expanded on this in the conclusion section.

References:
Reviewer 2 recommended changing the references to the Vancouver convention and we have done so accordingly.
Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to respond to reviewers and submit revisions. If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
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