Reviewer's report

Title: Knowledge of HIV and factors associated with attitudes towards HIV among final-year medical students at Hanoi Medical University in Vietnam

Version: 1 Date: 19 December 2013

Reviewer: Damir Bikmukhametov

Reviewer's report:

I would like to express my thankfulness to authors of the paper for their attention to issues of HIV-related stigma in healthcare settings, particularly biased attitudes among young medical doctors. We assume that newer generations of healthcare workers should be less stigmatizing, as knowledge about HIV and awareness about benefits of antiretroviral therapy are more common in the society. Whether this assumption holds, in fact, is subject to testing, which was done by the research team. In my opinion, authors’ intention to address the situation with HIV-related stigma and discrimination should be praised, so as their approach, namely – to question established practices in the system of medical education.

At the same time, the manuscript, in my opinion should be subjected to some changes before presenting to the journal’s readership.

Major compulsory revisions

1) General focus of the paper. Currently the paper seems to be focused on two items: imperfections in HIV medicine knowledge among medical students, and relations between level of knowledge and attitudes towards HIV-positive patients. I would suggest that authors focus more on analytical part and shorten descriptive sections.

2) Use of language. Throughout the article there are certain points where better terms could be used instead of words with stigmatizing potential. For example: “male homosexual”, “prostitute” (table 1) could be changed to MSM and CSW, respectively. Correctness of phrases, containing term “stigma towards” should be re-evaluated. In my understanding, term “HIV-related stigma” is more suitable and more widely accepted, unlike “stigma towards HIV”. Stigma affects a person, not a virus.

3) Methods section, pages 4-5 – description of the research instrument should be further elaborated to provide better understanding of its contents and reasoning behind choosing certain areas of interest.

4) Could the current project be seen as a secondary data analysis from another research? If so, it should be stated clearly.

5) It is mentioned that certain parts of the instrument were omitted from the analysis. In such case there is no need to provide detailed description of these parts (methods section, pg.5, last paragraph).
6) Analysis section, pg.6. Could you, please, provide reasoning for the way the data from attitudinal scales were assessed? It is not clear why summation of the results was chosen? Was this approach validated?

7) It is not clear why linear regression model was chosen and whether nature of the data allows using linear regression in this case. It is not exactly clear if the outcome variable was continuous (or why it was treated as if it is continuous), and if other statistical assumption for linear regression model are met. Also, it is not elaborated how the variables for the model were chosen, and how the model was fitted (besides small note in limitations section).

8) Results section, pg.7. From the first paragraph it can be understood that the curriculum is not fixed, and one student’s program may differ substantially from another’s? Is that correct? Does it mean that basics of HIV medicine are not part of the core training for medical doctors, since only 81% of students were trained in this area?

Minor essential revisions

1) Methods section – it is mentioned on page 5 that there were several other parts in the research instrument. Could you, please, provide more details about the original study? How many questions were in the instrument in total?

2) Original questionnaire included parts on knowledge about drug use. Since the epidemic in Vietnam, to certain extent, is driven by drug use, and stigma towards people who use drugs apparently comprises a significant layer of HIV-associated stigma, it is not clear why this part of the questionnaire was excluded from the analysis.

3) How exactly was the questionnaire administered? How were students who were selected by random-number generator approached? Was the survey self-administered? Was it paper-based or were any technical means utilized?

4) Ethics section, pg.4. From the text it is not clear, which division of Hanoi Medical University conducted institutional review of the study? Was the study reviewed locally or the approval was only administrative?

Discretionary Revisions

1) Presentation of descriptive statistics (table 1-4) could be revised to provide more clarity and details.

Level of interest:An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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