Reviewer's report

Title: Declining career preference for and image about the profession of youth health physician among Dutch medical students

Version: 4 Date: 21 June 2007

Reviewer: Tim Wilkinson

Reviewer's report:

This paper aimed to explore medical students career preferences, particularly in relation to youth health care and how these might be influenced by their perceived and actual knowledge of the profession and whether or not they have had a clerkship in that speciality.

I found this quite a difficult paper to review as it is quite lengthy and some of the messages that are being communicated are moderately complex. It is also possibly not helped by the fact that youth health care seems to be a distinctly Dutch entity and initially I also confused it with Paediatrics (although the authors have made it clear how these two disciplines differ). Furthermore, some of the data presentation is quite difficult to interpret, especially the figures, and think this could be helped by clear labelling of the X and Y axes and even with replacement of the numbers on the X-axis with the actual attributes that are being explored.

I think readers of the journal would wish to have a clear generic take home message that might be applicable to a broad range of areas and therefore focussing just on youth health risks the focus of this paper being too narrow.

Despite this, some of the findings are of great interest, particularly that career preferences don’t always seem to be related to prior experiences, nor to actual knowledge of the area and that perceived knowledge of an area does not always correlate with actual knowledge of an area. It is clear that a trainee’s choice of career is determined by many factors, possibly role modelling being one of the most influential, but this paper raises the possibility that some previously held beliefs may not be true; i.e. that exposing trainees to more information about a career may not necessarily influence their choice. I think the paper could therefore be improved if the authors were able to take a different focus and look more at these generic issues relating to influences on career choice as evidenced by youth health as a “case study”. If the authors could place less emphasis on the focus of the paper being on youth health and more on career choices, then it may have a wider appeal.

However, I do have one concern regarding even this aspect and this relates to the measures of actual knowledge of the profession. The authors correctly have defined this as the answers given by actual practitioners in the field, but it seems to me that the attributes that these practitioners chose are in fact common to
almost every specialty within medicine. In particular they comment that part time work possibilities, providing advice, communication skills, knowledge of a psychosocial background etc (as listed in the top 20 attributes on Table 3) are characteristics of the profession of a youth health physician. I would argue that these are common to most specialties and I presume some of the students who replied to the questionnaires may have also shared these views.

Major compulsory revisions
To re-focus the paper on the more generic issues relating to the relationship among experience, knowledge and career choice

Minor revisions
To comment on how the attributes of youth health, as answered by practitioners, distinguishes this discipline from other medical specialties

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests