Reviewer's report

Title: Changes in Use of Herbs and Dietary Supplements (HDS) Among Healthcare Professionals Enrolled in an Online Curriculum

Version: Date: 22 November 2006

Reviewer: Tannis Jurgens

Reviewer's report:

General

General comments: This manuscript describes a study to determine if taking an on-line course about HDS affected the extent of personal use of these products by a defined group of health care practitioners. Most of the data was collected as part of a larger study, parts of which has been published in this journal and several others.

The research question described in this paper is a logical extension from the objectives of the larger study.

The one comment that I do have is that if you read the discussion of the limitations of the study (which are very clearly and completely discussed), it makes you wonder if the project, because of its design, was destined to not detect a difference in use of HDS after taking the course. The discussion makes you realize that even if the data had detected a difference, it would have been difficult to say that the difference was as a result of taking the course.

The findings discussed in the next paragraph (higher use of HDS is associated with greater knowledge etc) was what was determined at baseline. This study did not add to our knowledge base in a positive way but did identify additional data that should be collected in future studies.

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

none

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. Background, first paragraph, L4- suggest changing “Rates also vary by” to “Rates of use have been shown to vary by” for clarity.

2. Background, second paragraph, L2-5. This paragraph is choppy. The intent is to provide reasons why the personal use of HDS by clinicians is important. The first two sentences (L2-4) don’t seem by themselves to support the first sentence (L1). I can read between the lines and know what is meant…… perhaps some minor editing of the sentences will clear it up.

3. Methods-3rd paragraph-, last sentence on the page- “all of these scales showed”- what are the scales? The first part of the sentence talks about survey questions-are the scales the answers (on a scale of 1-X)? I assume they are and so the wording needs to be edited for clarity. The last sentence of the paragraph “The same survey questions were used….” seems redundant. The very first sentence of the method section says they completed a survey upon enrollment and then upon completion. It doesn’t specifically say that the questions in both surveys were identical although it can be assumed (or maybe that is where the sentence in question should go)

4. Second page of methods-paragraph starting with “This analysis was restricted to”… The second sentence I think was provided to justify the method- it might fit better into the discussion and the sentence after it remaining. If the sentence in question is left in methods, I think it requires clarification. The sentence says that they expected seasonal variation in specific HDS but “the use of most other supplements would remain relatively stable”. Do the authors mean that under normal circumstances (without taking the course) the use of HDS by a health professional would remain stable? I would think that after taking the course they would expect the use of HDS NOT to remain stable? If I am confused please clarify.

5. Results-second page, 3rd sentence- “Baseline use of HDS was associated with older age…… Does the word “higher” need to be put in front of Baseline? Is that correct in all cases- higher baseline use meant higher scores on knowledge tests at baseline etc? This thought is repeated (maybe unnecessarily) in the
6. Last sentence in Results section- I am not sure what is meant by the “multiple comparisons effect”.

7. Discussion- 2nd sentence- remove the word “use”- 7th word. After this sentence, the sentence in the last paragraph of the results (Fish oil (containing omega-3 fatty acids…..) could be inserted here as it is more of a discussion fact (why the consumption of fish oil might have increased.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Last sentence in Background section- a suggestion is regarding the “relationship between changes in personal use of HDS and improvements in communication practices”- this implies that you know that the communication will be improved (which it probably will). Maybe this could be avoided by editing the sentence to say “we were curious how the changes in personal use of HDS and might affect communication practices”- (but maybe that is now assuming that there will be changes in personal use..?)

Statistical review

Is it essential that this manuscript is seen by an expert statistician? If so, please give your reasons in your report.

- Yes-authors describe the analysis as “simple descriptive statistics”. I do not have expertise in the area of statistics to comment on whether the correct statistical analysis was done. The analysis seems straightforward and so I doubt whether this needs to be reviewed by an expert statistician. For example, methods section says “all scales showed excellent Cronbach alpha”- I am not sure if that is appropriate? It would suffice if another reviewer can vouch for the fact that these were reasonable tests to do for the analysis of this data.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests