Reviewer's report

Title: What are the learning needs of Australian GP registrars for quality prescribing?

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Reviewer: Tim Dornan

Reviewer's report:

This paper report a multiple-methods survey of how Australian GP registrars learn to prescribe. Its strength is that it adds to a growing body of research defining an important problem for medical education. Its main limitation is that it is bound to a particular group of respondents in a particular country and not well linked to any theoretical or empirical analysis of the wider problem of learning safe prescribing. It could be strengthened by a bit more focusing on what the study actually did (report the status quo) rather than what it might have done (analyze, in any real depth, learning need and problems at any well theorized or generalisable level).

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

There is inconsistency in the manuscript as to whether it is asking an analytical question about learning need and difficulties meeting that need or describing the status quo; it tends strongly towards the latter

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

The selection of participants for the qualitative component could be described in a little more detail

3. Are the data sound?

Yes, with the proviso (acknowledged by the authors) that the response rate was low in the survey

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

More or less

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The conclusions in abstract go beyond the data and would benefit from being better supported

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

The section on limitations seems to see more about perceived strengths than
weaknesses but the low response rate is acknowledged.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

Yes and no. They say there is little prior research in the specific national context they describe, which I am sure is true, but do not link it to any wider theoretical or empirical body of scholarship to any substantial degree.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Simple comparison of the title with the results section of the abstract shows a lack of clarity in the paper - specifically, the espoused aim of the study and its reported findings are not always clearly aligned.

9. Is the writing acceptable?

The paper is clearly written.

Far be it from me to compel anybody to do anything (!) but I feel the paper would benefit from a revision by the authors to achieve the coherence this journal apparently seeks in its papers. What the authors did was survey learners in a particular national context and describe what they found. There are some interesting observations, such as the discontinuity between hospital and primary care prescribing. They also describe the essentially informal nature of learning. One gets the impression that this very important aspect of learning is very hit and miss. The paper adds to a corpus of work, which together poses a real problem for the medical education community. What instructional designs will ensure patient safety through the medium of efficient and effective prescribing. The paper doesn't explore that question in depth but it adds information about a rather chaotic status quo. A run through of the paper by the authors to focus the paper on what it truly did (describe the status quo) rather than what it might have done (identify learning need and propose effective training designs) would be beneficial.