Reviewer's report

**Title:** Joining the dots: programmatic assessment enhances recognition of factors hampering student progress

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 6 April 2011

**Reviewer:** Janet Yates

**Reviewer's report:**

This is one of the best papers that I have had the privilege to review. It covers the development of a new assessment scheme to provide a comprehensive, fair and defensible method for detecting, monitoring and remediating medical students whose performance falls short of expectations. This includes defects in professional behaviour, which are difficult to pick up and record systematically with traditional marks-based schemes. Significantly, the authors describe the introduction of the ‘conditional pass’, a simple but effective concept.

The authors have clearly put considerable thought and effort into this work over several years and present a lucid and convincing account.

I think that this paper has the potential to be influential on an international basis.

I have only 2 minor essential revisions to suggest, see points 3 and 8 below.

1 The question posed by the authors is well defined and highly topical.

2 The authors present a coherent account of the previous assessment system, the problems that it held for the detection and remediation of sub-optimal performance in an unambiguous manner, and the development and rationale for the new system.

3 The data are clearly presented with simple comparative statistics. Minor essential revision: please add p-values in the text (and also in the abstract).

4 Numerical data to support the results and conclusions of the study are simple, clear and unambiguous.

5 The discussion and conclusion are accurate, well written and adequately referenced within topical literature.

6 The limitations of the work, in terms of further evaluation, are clearly described.

7 The paper is well referenced in terms of the assessment and evaluation of medical students and the problems of underperformance.

8 The title is good and the abstract fine, with one minor essential revision, which is to make clear that the work so far described has focussed on the clinical years. Please also add p-values in the abstract, as mentioned in (3) above.
9 The standard of writing is extremely good, and made the paper a pleasure to read.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**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