Reviewer's report

Title: Does the inclusion of 'professional development' teaching improve medical students' communication skills?

Version: 1 Date: 5 November 2010

Reviewer: Carol A Pfeiffer

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? The question is clearly defined

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? The methods are well described. Given the inter-case variability that is a part of standardized patient assessments, the use of just one case per student limits the strength of the communication data from the years 1 and 2 study.

3. Are the data sound? There is no report on the measurement characteristics of the outcome measures that are used: DP scale, confidence in communicating, or the IRS. There is a good report of the reliability of the raters who used the IRS scale in this study, although the correlations between raters are low to moderate.

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

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

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Yes, many of the limitations are stated. But there is no mention of the fact that this is a study of just two cohorts at a single institution.

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 Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?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

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? The title reflects the uncertainty of the findings. I do not like it in a question format. The abstract is a good reflection of the paper

9. Is the writing acceptable? The writing is clear and well organized.

Please make your review as constructive and detailed as possible in your comments so that authors have the opportunity to overcome any serious deficiencies that you find and please also divide your comments into the following categories:

• Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore) 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) better description of the measures validity and reliability
• Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached). The lack of significant improvement from the intervention makes this paper of limited value. The longitudinal tracking of students from year 1 to year 3, to year 5 is an impressive effort, but the measurement of communication skills in the 3 assessments differs limiting the already weak conclusions.

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

**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.