Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Jane Kidd

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

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Please find below some general comments on the paper in response to the questions to be addressed. Some of these are then drawn out and repeated under the Discretionary and Minor Essential Revisions headings.

The authors provide a context for the study, the introduction of a new theme to the early years of a medical curriculum, and clearly identify three aims to be addressed, all of which are of interest to the medical education community. Each aim is explored in the paper.

The methodology is appropriate and clearly described. The reader is pointed to the literature for the Doctor Patient Scale and the information on the rating scale completed in respect of the observed communication skills is clearly explained. Information on the confidence in communicating and nervousness scales could be included as appendices or in totality in Table 3. Inter-rater reliability is presented and the authors explain the method used to determine the final score when the consultation was rated by two raters.

In respect of the data presented. The authors may wish to include in the results the number of students who completed the questionnaire elements in the old and new curriculum cohorts and they may wish to comment on the representativeness of the sample of students who participated in the interviews compared with the whole cohort and how similar the participants from each cohort were who participated in the video recorded consultation. It may be helpful for the reader to be made aware of the range of scores achieved on the questionnaires that the students completed and the IRS, as well as the mean and SD.

The discussion of the results and conclusions drawn are supported by the data presented to the reader. The authors may wish to ensure the reader is aware of the different results for the partial correlations in table 3 with one being positive and the second negative.
Limitations of the study are presented effectively and honestly. The difficulty with interpreting the data available from the OSCEs is important and it does call into question whether it is valid assessment of the professional development teaching. A more robust argument from the authors for the inclusion of this outcome would be helpful.

The referencing in the text and in the bibliography identify a range of relevant background papers from which this work has emerged.

The title and abstract represent the paper well and the writing is acceptable.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Further information on the intervention may be helpful for the reader. The authors state under Teaching Intervention that the new curriculum includes one session per week for 2 years on ‘professional development’ given the outcome addressed in this paper, communication skills, it may be helpful for the reader to know how many of these sessions there were in total and how many focused on communication skills. Currently it is not clear to the reader whether the difference is related to the number of sessions on communication skills in the old and new curriculum or that the new curriculum integrated the sessions.

2. Were the individual skills at which the students were better ones that were targeted in the new theme or not. It may be that other changes in the curriculum were having an impact and/or reinforcing the learning. The final sentence in paragraph 2 under discussion seems to argue against what the authors describe. That sentence states that “dedicated skills teaching can bring about improvements in clinical communication skills” this would suggest that the old curriculum (as described at the start of the paper under teaching intervention) ought to be more successful than the integrated sessions?

3. Did each cohort have the same experience of working with simulated patients prior to the video recorded assessment?

4. In respect of the data presented. The authors may wish to include in the results the number of students who completed the questionnaire elements in the old and new curriculum cohorts and they may wish to comment on the representativeness of the sample of students who participated in the interviews compared with the whole cohort and how similar the participants from each cohort were who participated in the video recorded consultation. It may be helpful for the reader to be made aware of the range of scores achieved on the questionnaires that the students completed and the IRS, as well as the mean and SD.

5. Information on the content and results of the confidence in communicating and nervousness scales could be included as appendices or in totality in Table 3.

Minor essential revisions

1. In the abstract under methods the sample size is given as 82 in the first sentence but if one adds the numbers given in respect of cohort 1 and cohort 2 in
the second sentence it adds to 62 (old cohort 35 and new cohort 27). Under Results, number of videoed consultations the data is presented as 47 in the new cohort. Paper requires consistency in respect of the number of participants.

2. Check the number presented in respect of number of interviews (82 or 62) that were videoed and how many/what percentage were double coded. This information is presented under Procedure, Rating of observed communication, second sentence.

3. There is a mismatch in the information presented for the Total IRS score in years 1 and 2. Under “The impact of professional development teaching on observed communication skills”, he first two sentences in the text appear to be giving a different message from Table 2 where the legend at the bottom of the table states that “Mean values in bold represent statistically significant differences at p<0.05”

4. The difficulty with interpreting the data available from the OSCEs is important and it does call into question whether it is valid assessment of the professional development teaching. A more robust argument from the authors for the inclusion of this outcome would be helpful.

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

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.