Reviewer's report

Title: Key challenges in simulated patient programs: An international comparative case study

Version: 1 Date: 5 July 2011

Reviewer: adam wendling

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
The authors seek to illustrate, “challenges in SP methodology, faculty, organisational structure and quality assurance” through in depth case-study qualitative research method.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The authors’ discussion of the methods is appropriately brief.

3. Are the data sound?
While the data are sound, it is of limited application.

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

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
The discussion and conclusions are reasonably supported by the limited data. However, the authors did not discuss the different regulatory and fiscal policies in these widely divergent settings. While the authors mention there are national accrediting pressures in Canada, are such demands present in the other nations?

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Significant limitations are not mentioned in the discussion. Specifically, while case studies provide detailed results of small populations or rare conditions, they are of limited application. With the broad use of SPs around the world, a study of four institutions is extremely limited in scope since the available study population is immense. The authors fail to discuss the application of their findings for the wider audience. How does the experience in Australia or Switzerland relate to that in different medical education paradigms such as the US? How are the regulatory and fiscal pressures different in these institutions?

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
While the authors address numerous articles describing the advantages of SPs in medical education, they omit similar reports of broad national and international surveys of SP programs that discuss SP methodology, faculty and organizational structure. How is this work significantly different and how does it advance medical education beyond these other works?

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

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

Major Compulsory Revisions - none

Minor Essential Revisions - none

Discretionary Revisions
1. Much of the third paragraph of the Introduction could be replaced with a table of advantages of SPs.
2. In table 2, the authors list each institutions’ SP hourly pay in each nations’ currency, making comparisons for the reader more difficult. Please consider converting each pay rate to a single currency.

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.