Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluating a Grading Change at UCSD School of Medicine: Pass/Fail Grading is Associated with Decreased Performance on Preclinical Exams but Unchanged Performance on USMLE Step 1 Scores

Version: 1 Date: 2 April 2014

Reviewer: Marta van Zanten

Reviewer's report:

This study evaluated the effect of a change in grading system from honors/pass/fail to pass/fail on students' performance. Results showed that while students' under the new pass/fail system performed worse on preclinical examinations, there was no effect on USMLE Step 1 scores.

The following comments are all discretionary revisions:

Overall while this is an interesting topic and a well written paper, it appears from the literature review that there are already several studies that set forth answers to this same question. The authors of this current paper therefore should strengthen the description of the purpose of this study by expanding on explaining exactly how this paper adds to the literature already on this topic.

In the Methods section, the authors state that course performance is determined by both examination percentage scores and to a lesser extent, laboratory and small group performance scores. It’s not clear if these potentially subjective scores are included in the analysis, or only examination scores. If these laboratory and small group performance scores are included, it is not clear if any of the lower scores in the new grading scheme class are potentially attributable to teachers grading students more harshly on the subjective elements under the new grading scheme, rather than lower student performance.

Were the students in the grading changing class surveyed on their perception of the change and their well-being? The authors cite studies that indicate student well being is higher in a pass/fail system, but it is not clear if the opinions of the subjects of this study were investigated.

The Discussion section is somewhat repetitive of the rest of the paper and offers relatively little interpretation. In the last sentence of the paper, the authors indicate their opinion that it seems “reasonable” to recommend continuation of pass/fail grading. This recommendation appears to be a key point of the paper, and therefore this information should also be provided in the abstract.

In the Background section, the point about medical schools recently switching from a tiered grading system to pass/fail requires a reference.

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

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.