Reviewer's report

Title: On Death and Dying - Evaluation of a Reflective, Interdisciplinary Course Element in Anatomy Undergraduate Teaching

Version: 1 Date: 18 October 2013

Reviewer: Christoph Ostgathe

Reviewer's report:

Thank you very much for the possibility to review this manuscript. The authors of the paper describe results of a questionnaire based study in first year medical students exploring the experiences on issues of dying and death, their expectations and fears before and after the dissecting course within the anatomy training. Therefore quantitative and qualitative analysis tools were used. Embedded is a voluntary seminar to reflect on personal experiences, including - above others - discussions on dignity, empathy and attitudes towards the body donator. Data of the formal evaluation is presented in the paper. The issue of teaching end-of-life issues, giving the undergraduate medical students the possibility to reflect on their own experiences and attitudes is highly beneficial and an under-recognized part in training. Therefore the topic the authors address is prevailing. Overall the paper offers interesting and worth reading insight into education on end of life issues in an important setting, that I would like to read in BMC Education. However the paper has major weaknesses that the authors should thoroughly address before publication.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Overall the paper would benefit substantially from a more focused approach. The title already is misleading and promises too much. The majority of the data presented is on the pre- and post dissecting course questionnaire. Data on the seminar is not sufficiently interconnected to the findings from the questionnaire(s). In particular the aim of the study is described to be “to prepare students mentally and emotionally”. I am not confident that the methodology used as presented is able to find out whether this goal is achieved. Maybe it would be much more helpful and enriching to read, if the paper is focused on the pre- and post-analysis. The content, the format and the learning objectives of the seminar may be described in more detail in the discussion section, as it potentially addresses perceived needs possibly found in the in the first questionnaire. Additionally due to the voluntary nature of the seminar comparability with the rest of the data may be hampered.

Method: Give some information on the content of the opening lecture, what was the rational to have the questionnaire answered after and not before that; give some insight on the format of the dissection course. May these contents have influenced the results of the questionnaire?

Result: The results section has to be clarified substantially. There is data on the
response rate, but no data on the size of the population. Differentiate clearly between pre- and post, maybe insert a table with all results, including a description of the participating students in each questionnaire. I would like to see there results from the statistical analysis (e.g. significance of differences as it was promised in the method section). The figures of the quantitative data are not understandable without an n.

Overall the paper would benefit – if at all I can judge not being a native speaker myself - from language editing.

Minor / Discretionary Revisions

Throughout the paper (proposal): Rephrase Palliative Care into Palliative Medicine (or is name of the Department Palliative Care?)

Throughout the paper (proposal): Rephrase “death and dying” into “dying and death”

Throughout the paper: Consistent use of one term “dissection course” instead of “anatomy course” or “dissecting anatomy course”.

Throughout the paper (proposal): What is a “medical attitude”, maybe better just “attitudes”

Page 2: “the dissecting course is broadly considered”, please give references

Page 5: “cadaveric donation” maybe better “body donation”

Page 6: “maybe better instead of ”their reasons to donate” – “their willingness to”

Page 7: I doubt that the data allows to assume that the teaching intervention is effective

Page 8: I would be careful with the assumption that the data is representative, don´t mix the response rates

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Yes

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

Not sufficiently

3. Are the data sound?

Yes, but still they have be reviewed by the authors

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?

Not completely
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
To the best of my knowledge, yes

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Not accurately

9. Is the writing acceptable?
To the best of my knowledge, the paper would benefit from proofreading of a native speaker

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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