Reviewer’s report

Title: Fitness-to-practice concerns in rural undergraduate medical education: a qualitative study

Version: 2 Date: 19 May 2014

Reviewer: Janet Yates

Reviewer’s report:

I enjoyed reading this paper, which I found very interesting, and will be of relevance to others concerned with medical student (and other health professional) attitude and behaviour.

1 Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Yes, the background has been well set-out and the research questions adequately defined.

2 Are the methods appropriate and well described?

In general, the methods are clearly described and suitable for the research. I do have a few comments (for compulsory revisions):

1 I think you need to explain the positions (jobs) of the authors in the medical school hierarchy, and whether they all were personally known to the students and/or routinely dealt with the ‘problem’ ones. This should be either in the Methods or in a clear statement at the end of the paper, since it has the potential to affect (2) below

2 It is regrettable that you were unable to recruit your initial target students since they might have had some different views about behavioural issues. However, one suspects that they were trying to keep below the radar so it is perhaps not surprising! It would be good if you could expand a little on how the students were first invited to participate (personal letters or phone calls/emails?), and how many were contacted and refused. Secondly, how did you eventually recruit?

3 I presume all participants were all assured of full anonymisation, and this should be stated in the paper. I expect your ‘refusal’ students still felt that they could be identified subsequently because of the small size of the medical school, and this is also something that you might wish to discuss.

4 Data collection – you state that interviews were either face-to-face or by phone but it would be nice to know how many of each group were done by each method, as this could also potentially affect participants’ willingness to be open. On average, how long did each interview last? Were participants given a copy of the interview schedule beforehand? Or some detail of what topics were to be covered?
3 Are the data sound?

Yes, as far as one can tell with qualitative research of this nature with a small sample size. The quotations are appropriate and informative.

NB, in the section ‘Extent of FTP concerns and issues’ you appear to have left in the initials of the interviewees (minor essential revision).

I was interested in your quotation on p10, ‘… they already have an intern job so they don’t care’. This seems almost a throw-away remark but is potentially quite important, because there is evidence in the literature that medical students/young doctors are failing to realise that their private life (eg on social networking sites) cannot be entirely divorced from their professional life, and standards have to be upheld outside the working environment. Do you agree that this is a similar scenario?

Also, on p 13 you state that there was unfamiliarity with the AHPRA regulations – this seems quite worrying and might merit discussion.

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

Data are reported adequately. Data of this type are not normally deposited.

5 Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and supported by the data?

The Discussion is good but could perhaps be expanded a little (discretionary revisions) – for example, there is evidence in the literature that mental health issues are a very significant problem at undergraduate level, affecting progress as well as FTP issues, which you might want to mention, as well as some of the points mentioned above. It also seemed a concern to me that one or two of your staff interviewees were almost making excuses for poor student behaviour. Understandable, but appropriate?

The Conclusions are well-written and appropriate. The tension inherent in providing a supportive environment, which is not viewed as punitive or stigmatising, is a huge issue for medical schools.

6 Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

Not really – a short para mentioning the recruitment problems, and possible effects of the relationship of the authors to the participants, should be included (minor essential).

8 Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

Yes.

9 Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes, the Title is fine and the Abstract gives a clear overview of the study.

10 Is the writing acceptable?
Yes, the paper is well-written and easy to read.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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'