Reviewer's report

Title: Factors influencing the effectiveness of multisource feedback in improving the professional practice of medical practitioners: A systematic review

Version: 1

Date: 8 February 2014

Reviewer: Renee Stalmeijer

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to do this review. I enjoyed reading the manuscript which deals with a hot topic within the assessment domain namely multi-source feedback (MSF) as a tool to improve the professional practice of medical practitioners. The authors performed a systematic review in order to answer the questions 'what impact does MSF have on the professional practice of medical doctors' and 'what are the main factors of MSF that influence its impact on the professional practice of medical doctors'. Overall the study is well executed and the findings help us to discover new research questions and suggestions for practice. However I feel that the manuscript needs to be improved on a number of areas before it can be accepted for publication.

Title/Abstract

The background in the abstract makes me assume that you will answer the question 'does MSF work or not', the title however suggest something different (more attention for factors that are assumed to make it work or not). In the results in the abstract mentions 'acceptance and use of MSF', but does acceptance imply behavioral change in itself? What would have been interesting to know as well is 'what does MSF NOT do?'. Furthermore I feel that the concept of 'competence' is used rather loosely. It is a tricky concept and the focus of a lot of debate. What do the authors consider to be competence?

Background

The first sentence already struck me. It states ‘medical practitioners are now professionally accountable for the standard of patient services they provide’. Were they not before??

There seems to be a (unintended) contradiction present within the background. First of all it is stated by the authors that many assessment approaches involve subjective judgments. However MSF is a collection of subjective judgments. Moreover the authors cite evidence that MSF was considered to be the most appropriate and practical method. I think it would be worthwhile diving into the literature surrounding subjectivity in performance based assessment and workplace assessment which are the basis for MSF. Many authors (Dijkstra et al, vd Vleuten et al, Berendonk et al) have come to conclude that a collection of subjective assessments to amount to a more objective assessment. Small detail, the 'recent systematic review of a diverse range of assessment methods' you refer to is already 7 years old...
Furthermore the addition of self-assessment to MSF procedures has a very clear (and proven) purpose which the authors do not elaborate upon. It would help the quality of their introduction if they did.

Methods

The first paragraph of the methods puzzles me. What was the intention with this paragraph? Furthermore I think that starting with the search strategy and key words used would be more appropriate. In addition to that, although the Medline search is included in a table, a short description of the keywords used in-text would be preferred by me.

Although the authors display the use of the Buckley et al 2009 criteria list as a strength of the study, I have to partly disagree. When taking a closer look at the criteria it becomes clear that this list was designed for quantitative study designs. However the majority of the studies that ended up in the systematic review were mixed methods or qualitative. I feel that it would have been better if you had added a framework to assess the quality of the manuscripts which is more focused on qualitative methodology (e.g. Malterud 2001, Kuper et al 2009, Frambach et al 2013). Small detail, the lay-out removed some of the words in table 4 (Buckley criteria).

Results

There are some inconsistencies and unclear concepts in Table 6. Abbreviations for the various MSF tools are not explained. Format of feedback is inconsistently described (facilitator yes/no, confidential report yes/no, etc). The column describing changes identified holds some vague concepts that should be further defined.

Contradiction on page 11 ‘a large minority of raters’…?

p.13 What is considered ‘time to reflect’? The following sentence needs clarifying ‘whether the feedback received was used for learning and change’ # do you mean as opposed to used for appraisal and judgment?

The finding that feedback needed to be facilitated to be effective is repeated quite often in the results and in the discussion. Overrepresentation of the findings? Future research agenda of the authors? In any case, it would help if the authors could elaborate on what characteristics of good facilitators are and who they should be.

Small details:

- Something has gone wrong with a number of bookmarks in the text.
- Contradiction on page 11 ‘a large minority of raters’…?

Discussion/Conclusion

How do the authors define ‘educational impact’? That would help interpret their discussion.

On p.14 the sentence ‘while a number of systematic reviews (…) behaviours of medical doctors’ needs some references to support the statement.
Again I notice that the role of the facilitator is mentioned quite often. 
I like the fact that you contrast your findings with findings from a different domain. 
If you found more evidence from a different domain it would be good to add it. 
Reference 43 is an odd reference to support the first described strength of the study. 
I feel that implications for practice and research should be part of the discussion, not the conclusion. 
Table 7 could be improved by indicating after each element which study from the review supported this element. 
With regard to the statement that it is unclear whether changes made are sustained over a longer period of time, the authors should also consider the difference between a ‘one-shot intervention’ and ‘prolonged exposure to MSF’.

**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 not competing interests