Reviewer's report

Title: Using a Formative Simulated Patient Exercise for Curriculum Evaluation

Version: Date: 20 February 2004

Reviewer: Louis J Grosso

Reviewer's report:

General

Before reading my review you should be aware that I've known David Solomon for a number of years. We have never collaborated on any research or work activities but have worked together in professional organizations. I believe that I have provided a fair and honest evaluation of this study. At the same time if you want to discount my review because of my professional relationship with David I understand.

In general this is a reasonably well done study. In particular, I liked the way that the natural rotation structure was incorporated into the study. For the most part, both the methodology and analyses seemed appropriate to me. The authors also did a good job of outlining the limitations of the work, for example the small sample sizes and that it is pilot work.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

I have a few concerns about this study that revolve mainly around its clarity for someone who may not be very familiar with Participatory Decision-Making (PDM) and other unique aspects of this study.

In the background section the authors mention the prior research into the use of PDM but do not address the findings of these works. More information is needed here.

In the intervention section and latter in the statistical analysis section Braddock’s model is mentioned. This appears to be a critical component of the study. Some elaboration on the specifics of this model would be very helpful to the reader.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Figure 1 is not labeled.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The last sentence of the measures section states that "no formal training was given in how to rate the students." It would be reasonable for the authors to note there sense as to whether this may or may not have an influence on the results. It is a potential limitation of the study.

I found both the study design and results sections a little hard to follow. The timing of the various
clerkships done in each rotation along with when the intervention occurred make for a somewhat confusing situation. The explanation in the paper was a bit hard to follow. The second paragraph of his section was the most difficult for me. The figure helps clear things up some. At the same time, I don’t have a suggestion of how to present this information any more clearly.

The last three paragraphs of the results section present the statistical analyses. My interpretation of these is that the first of the three paragraphs is presenting the overall significance testing. Finding significance the authors then pursued post hoc comparisons and these are presented in the last two paragraphs of this section. If so, it might be reasonable to state this explicitly in the paper. I was also curious why a comparison between cells 3 and 5 was not presented. I recognize they were the smallest groups. At the same time the differences between scores is the largest.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None