Reviewer's report

Title: Unhappiness and dissatisfaction in doctors cannot be predicted by selectors from medical school application forms: A prospective, longitudinal study

Version: 1 Date: 6 September 2005

Reviewer: David Alan Powis

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a concise and well-written paper that addresses an important issue in the context of medical student selection: what is the predictive value of a (candidate’s) personal statement and the referee report on the application form originally submitted in connection with medical school admission? The conclusion that the statements do not predict whether the doctors, when graduated and into their careers, will be happy and satisfied with their chosen profession will be of considerable interest to medical student selectors. The text flows well and leads the reader logically through the story. However there are four issues that I consider should be addressed by the authors before an editorial decision on publication is made. I have also listed a few minor points that should be considered by the authors.

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

1. There are two statements made at the bottom of page 7 that at first appear to be quite convincing: ‘there was no correlation between the difference in Big Five personality scores…..Assessors are not therefore implicitly assessing aspects of personality’, and ‘The difference in educational achievement between the doctors in a pair…..it seems likely that the assessors are judging that the doctor…….’. These statements and their conclusions fit in very well with the line the argument is taking and, as such, tend not to attract a critical gaze. However read with a good memory of what was written in the methods section the picture suddenly becomes confused. (The methods describe that the assessors completed a ‘brief assessment of personality…..Big Five etc’ but the methods make no explicit mention that the doctors being assessed had earlier completed the Big Five. Therefore one begins to wonder why the similarities and differences between the assessors’ characteristics should give rise to the conclusions drawn! (It would help to have specific sub-sections in both the methods and results sections dealing with the psychometric tests, and who took them. in the context of this study)

2. Accepting now that it is the doctors’ and not the assessors’ characteristics that underpinned the conclusions drawn, why does table S1 not show any significant difference between the educational achievement of happy and unhappy doctors?

3. The personal statement (of the candidate) and the referee’s report (about the candidate) would be presumed to provide different information yet the two were apparently read by the assessors as a single data source. There are several possibilities of relevance to the present study, for example the PS ad RR could give a consistent picture of the candidate. Alternative they might emphasise different aspects of the candidate’s character, personality and achievements. Or the RR might contradict parts of the PS. I presume that the authors did not have the assessors look at the PS and RR independently, but I would like to read some discussion of why it was decided that both together would be the better option in view of the objective of the study. (Incidentally, do the authors have any idea of the relative weighting the assessors gave to PS and RR in their determinations?)

4. A reader could draw a wrong conclusion from a sentence in the discussion (bottom, p8): ‘…..it might be more beneficial to use psychometrically assessed personality scores than…….’. A reader
might get the impression that you are saying that the Big 5 data reported here for the doctors is of predictive value. (Incidentally what do you mean by the word ‘beneficial’ in this context?)

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

1. ‘satisfied’ and ‘happy’ are not, strictly, synonyms, but they are used in this paper as if they are. However, in the present context it is reasonable to use them as such, but a statement should be made to this effect. (I wonder if the assessors, or the doctors, made a distinction between the terms. Also when the authors were drafting the paper what determined the choice of ‘happy’ or ‘satisfied’ or ‘happy/satisfied’ in the text?)
2. ‘data were’ rather than ‘data was’ (page 2 methods, and possibly elsewhere).
3. Is it grammatically correct to say ‘none of the groups of assessors were above chance expectations……’? (p 2 results).
4. Pairs of assessors taking longer……. (p 2 results).
5. ‘with a fifth or more of junior doctors….’ (p 3 background).
6. ‘but because of time constraints…..’. Whose time constraints? Do you mean to say because we didn’t wish to overload the assessors? (p5)
7. Results, p6 and elsewhere: p rather than P for probability.
8. Eighty four rather than 84 at start of sentence (p7)
9. Middle para, p10 should be in results section rather than discussion section.
10. Would it help to have an example PS and RR in the supplementary information section to show non UK readers what these typically contain?
11. Give n=40 (or whatever) for the happy and unhappy group data given in table S1
12. what is the value for ‘n’ assessors reported in Table S3?

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests