Reviewer's report

Title: A quantitative survey of intern's knowledge of communication skills: An Iranian exploration

Version: Date: 22 December 2004

Reviewer: Gerald P Whelan

Reviewer's report:

General

Overall, although the authors do acknowledge this under limitations, it is essential to recognize that this paper reports the results of a self reported survey and as such is certainly subject to subject bias. It might be helpful to replace the term "knowledge" with "confidence" at many points in the text in that there really was no assessment of the interns' knowledge but rather their personal confidence that they possessed or did not possess the knowledge (and skills?) to deal with the various communications scenarios.

The outcome of the study is fairly intuitive insofar as it is not at all surprising that individuals who recognize (or are advised about) the importance of communications skills in Medicine, and who have had virtually no education or training in those skills, would express a very limited confidence in their ability to function in those areas and would be supportive of formalizing such education and training into the curriculum.

The identification of the two areas of least confidence, breaking bad news and sex education, is also not surprising nor is that likely unique to Iranian physicians. However, the discussion as to what the issues may be with respect to sex education particularly among female interns is certainly relevant to the local culture and has some implications for the Iranian educational model, particularly with respect to gender integration. The apparently higher level of confidence reported in virtually all areas by males relative to females is another finding that is again neither surprising nor unique.

Probably the only really useful result of the survey is the recognition by the students themselves of their deficiencies and an interest in addressing them. Given that the Iranian culture might otherwise be expected to be somewhat resistant to incorporating these elements into formal medical education, it provides the champions of such education with some possibly very useful support in negotiating changes in curriculum which are always difficult.

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

None

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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)

Selectively replace the term "knowledge" with "confidence" with respect to self assessments

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
Include some of the overall mean performance figures by gender across all areas on Table 4 and/or include scores for the entire cohort, male and female combined. This might highlight the overall gender differences.

**What next?**: Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest**: An article of limited interest

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

**Statistical review**: No

**Declaration of competing interests**: I declare that I have no competing interests