Reviewer’s report

Title: Medical students’ perceptions in relation to ethnicity and gender: a qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 24 October 2005

Reviewer: Katarina Hamberg

Reviewer’s report:

General
Review comments to the manuscript Medical students’ perspectives in relation to ethnicity and gender: a qualitative study.

This manuscript deals with issues that are important to medical educators. The research question is not new but there is a need for more research within this field.

The aim and approach, qualitative interviews, made me curious and interested. I hoped to find new information and results in a context. Unfortunately the results were rather foreseeable and a bit ‘on the surface’ being derived from interviews. The results are more or less reported and I miss the researchers’ interpretations of the statements. Foremost, I miss comparisons with previous research. This means that I find the topic and results interesting but I think the researchers have some more work left to do.

I hope the authors want to rewrite and that they can benefit from my comments.

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

To be accepted for publication it is, according to my evaluation, compulsory that the authors 1) better describe the method, 2) discuss the methodological issues/problems of importance for readers to be aware of when transferring the results to other settings, 3) include more of previous research on gender differences and gender issues within medical schools and compare and evaluate own findings with this previous research in the discussion.

Method
The qualitative method is shortly described and to me, living outside of GB, it is not easy to find the thesis I am recommended to read if I want more details (page 5 before insert table 1.)
- I find it important to know when the interviews were conducted since a lot of changes in people’s attitudes are taking place over time.
- How long were the interviews?
- The authors claim that they stopped interviewing when saturation was reached in the key themes. However, saturation is not an easy thing to evaluate especially since there were several key themes - some already reported in another article (ref 14). I miss reflections about this delicate problem in the discussion.

Throughout the manuscript the authors have chosen to report on how many students that mentioned certain issues and themes. This gives the reader an impression of the importance of each theme, which is good. However, it should be underlined that the figures are less definite than figures from an enquiry. For example, 7/15 male students reported ‘external’ reasons why they decided to study medicine while none of the women did (page 6). Only women expressed fascination with the human body (page 6). It is reasonable to believe that an issue is more important to those who mention it
than those who don't. Nevertheless we don't know whether all students would have agreed to that they were fascinated by anatomy if they were asked about it. I mean that it is necessary to comment on the implications of the figures in the discussion.

Thus, one has reason to be careful when evaluating the proportions of male and female student mentioning certain issues or themes. Not mentioning a topic does not mean that this student did not find it important – it only means that he or she did not bring it up in the interview. The validity of the figures derived in content analysis of a semi-structured interview study is different compared to figures derived from an enquiry where all participants have answered the same questions.

I miss references to previous studies on gender issues in medical schools. There is a large bulk of research showing gendered attitudes and even discrimination due to gender in medical schools. That the majority of the students in this study claimed that no gender differences existed, while some described such differences in their narratives is an important finding, and the authors also underline this. Still, I miss a more thorough discussion about this phenomenon - not being aware of gender aspects and thus not recognising a problem or phenomenon as a gender issue - often reported in studies about gender equity. There are research about gender differences in female and male students opportunities in training their skills, sexual harassments, gender differences in surgery, career etc. that would be of relevance for the interpretations of the results in this study. I think it is important that the authors compare the results with what others have found since this is not a new field of knowledge. See for example:


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

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

- I miss information in the method section about who made the interviews and who read them. In the statement about authors’ contributions they say that the first author made all interviews and also carried out the analysis while the second author advised. Since I am a bit surprised about the infrequent interpretations my reflection was that it might have been a good idea with both researchers reading and reflecting about the data.

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

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No
Declaration of competing interests:

I'm for the moment involved in research on gender aspects at a Swedish medical school. Because of that I have read a lot of the current literature on gender differences and/or with a gender perspective in the analysis. Of course my own experiences within this field have an impact on my evaluation of this manuscript.