Reviewer's report

Title: Learning to Mark: a qualitative study of the experiences and concerns of medical markers.

Version: 1 Date: 2 December 2005

Reviewer: Brian McKinstry

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting study into an important area. The research question is clearly defined and the methods well described. The authors describe how they purposively sampled 7 participants from a possible field of 16 on the basis of experience, however it would be useful to know if all 16 had been approached and if all volunteered. It could be argued for example that the more conscientious marker might be more likely to take part in a study such as this. Clearly this is a small sample from a small pool and therefore it is hard to be sure about the generalisability of the conceptual analysis.

The field work and data analysis is well described and multiple members of the research team coded and analysed the work to address possible ambiguities in these processes. Additionally findings were fed back to the larger population of examiners in order to validate the findings. No mention is made of specifically seeking outliers or of continuing the interview process until data saturation occurred which makes me a little concerned that dissenting voices may not have been heard.

The results are presented in a coherent and engaging way. The results very much 'chimed' with what one might expect. I was struck by how conscientious these GP markers appeared to be and I suppose that does make me wonder about the validity of the process….was any one likely to admit that they just skimmed through marking these papers and didn’t really care too much about the outcomes? Having said that there are responses which appear very honest, and some interesting insights which will inform future work, possibly quantitative, exploring the impact of different approaches to marking.

I feel the paper would be strengthened by a critique mentioning the drawbacks in terms of size, generalisability and validity issues. Possibly a statement about how this study might lead on to further research would be also be appropriate.

Brian McKinstry

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

A description of how the sample was obtained (e.g. did anyone refuse to take part?)
A sentence in the discussion outlining the possible weaknesses of the study (size, generalisability and validity)

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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)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Possibly a statement about how this study might lead on to further research would be also be appropriate

What next?: Accept after minor essential 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 declare that I have no competing interests.