Reviewer's report

Title: Loss of International Medical Experiences: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes at Risk

Version: 2 Date: 16 May 2007

Reviewer: James Sanders

Reviewer's report:

General
A very worthy topic, indeed. As one who also struggles with the situation the authors describe in their paper, I sympathize and agree with many of their findings. However, from an academic point of view, the authors have submitted a paper that is too broadly written without the necessary underpinning literature citations to support their claims. The paper is full of these unsubstantiated claims. As a debate article it is fatally flawed for this reason.

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

Please explain what is meant by, "Explicit in the IM's funding is that monies for indigent and underinsured care are provided."?
Even opinion pieces must be buttressed by some degree of evidence. For example, the opening of the paper describes both the "great influence" IM's have and the current woeful climate that creates burdens to IM opportunities. Yet, at best these are anecdotes without any larger sense of their relative importance to the benefits of or the barriers to IM opportunities. The authors would serve their subject matter better if they could quantify these in some manner (how many residency programs currently offer IM opportunities? How many did so 10 years ago? - as an aside, my anecdotal data tells me that the numbers are going up not down - What are the residents' attitudes towards barriers? etc.). Another example is when the authors state, "Exposure to the underserved in the developing world can produce a commitment to the service that is unparalleled". A lovely thought, but without cited evidence.

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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)

I would change the phrase "expose the housestaff to common diseases" to something more in keeping w/ the spirit of the sentence...."expose" conjures up actual contagions.

Why is International Medical Experiences capitalized half way through the article and no where else?

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

I do not agree with the statement the "IM's provide important experiences in clinical, epidemiological, cultural, and political arenas that cannot otherwise be easily had." Yet, somehow, US post graduate training has managed to turn out many, many great doc's without having to go abroad to do it....perhaps it is better said that IM's provide opportunities that are unique, but not irreplaceable. I also find it dubious that one of the authors can actually remember a trip taken at the age of two to Bangladesh. Much less the fact that it was somehow life changing and inspirational for his future career in international health.

On another section the writers make a case for the importance of doctors learning about tropical diseases and "organophosphate" poisoning. Frankly, until these diseases become more prevalent in the US there is little utility in spending healthcare dollars to train doctors to become facile in this clinical way. Most doctors will go their entire careers without the need for this kind of clinical training. By emphasizing the importance of the clinical exam skills gained in IM's the authors miss the opportunity to dwell upon the importance of the cultural and community medicine expertise that IM's offer. It is this type of experience that probably will create better physicians for the US rather than any clinical work, per se. However, there is no data to support the authors' contentions nor my own.
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 limited interest

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

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

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