Reviewer's report

Title: 'It gives you an understanding you can't get from any book'. The relationship between medical students' and doctors' personal illness experiences and their performance: a qualitative and quantitative study

Version: 1  Date: 2 July 2007

Reviewer: Trudie T Roberts

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting paper which as the authors’ state looks at the evidence for the widespread anecdote that serious personal illness or illness of a close friend/relative makes one more empathic. Additionally the authors look at the effects these factors might have on examination performance, personal anxiety and confidence levels of individuals. Overall this article is well written and engaging and tentative explanations of the finding are appropriately offered.

I have a few minor points for suggested improvement:

• On page 4 in the final paragraph it would be of interest to know the time period i.e. are the results for the students seeking healthcare over one year, five years or ten years?

• It would be useful to understand what the definition of a serious illness was and how this was communicated to the questionnaire respondents, as differing ideas of what constitutes a serious illness by individuals could effect the results.

• The authors state the number of students and the doctors sent questionnaires. Presumably the numbers in table 1 are the respondents which would give a very high response rate and it would be useful to include this in the text as a percentage as this strengthens the findings.

• I am not a statistician and so I would suggest further review of the statistics are in order. My observations are that there appears to be some slight inconsistencies in that the investigators compute means, effect size and talk about trends which are parametric variables but use Spearman’s Rho and Mann Whitney tests which are none parametric tests. The Chi-squared test is appropriate. It might be useful if the authors test their data for normality and if they find it is then that’s fine and they could do the usual parametric tests giving the usual caveats. If the data is not normal it would be useful to know this and then the caveats need to be addressed at effect size and mean.

• Finally is the Spearman’s Rho value of -1.34 on page 10 correct, it seems a little suspect.
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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)

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: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests: I have no competing interests