Reviewer's report

Title: Medical theses as part of the scientific training in medical and dental basic education

Version: 1 Date: 15 August 2007

Reviewer: Titus K Schleyer

Reviewer's report:

General

The authors address the important topic of the role that writing a thesis plays in the education of physicians and dentists. Specifically, they focus on certain quality aspects of theses, whether they have been published in peer-reviewed journals or not, and to what degree those publications have been cited. As such, the article is helpful in assessing and considering what importance should be assigned to theses as part of medical/dental education, as well as their contribution to the general scientific literature.

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

The paper suffers from a number of flaws that should be addressed before publication can be considered.

- First, this is a very localized, small-scale study whose results are, at face value, poorly generalizable. The title and some of the introductory material create raised expectations that are not fulfilled in the manuscript. Therefore, this paper should more strongly emphasize its limited scope and limitations.

- Second, the paper touches on the controversy of requiring theses during medical and dental education. This leaves the reader guessing as to what some of the arguments, pro and con, are, and detracts from the main purpose of the paper. A full discussion of that controversy would take up a paper all by itself. Therefore, the authors should limit themselves to the premise they make implicitly, i.e. that theses are useful, and rather focus more attention on the evaluation of quality and bibliometric aspects.

- The brief description of review criteria and the method employed does not inspire much confidence in the reliability and validity of results. For instance, how was the appropriateness of statistical methods determined? Did more than one reviewer rate each thesis? If so, what was the inter-rater reliability?

- The authors found evidence for several types of weaknesses in the theses. To what degree can they be tied back to the local regulations and culture regarding theses at the University of Oulu? Clearly, this information would provide
much-needed context for the results.

- It was surprising to see that the authors did not consider whether a thesis was available on the Internet. As research has shown, resources available on the Internet tend to be more highly cited. It would have been interesting to see whether that applied in this case.

- A brief literature search on theses in dental and medical education retrieved some other citations about aspects of theses that are discussed in this paper. This would argue for a more thorough review of the published literature on the subject of evaluating theses.

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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)

- For publication in an international journal, style and language should be reviewed to make sure most readers understand the paper. There were some minor occurrences of terms that may not be familiar to all readers (e.g. “theoretical department” would be “basic science department” in the US).

- Certain terms were misused, e.g. “Characters” should be “Characteristics” (p. 5), and “median” on page 7 should be “mean,” since the median number of publications would presumably be an integer.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

none

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'