Author's response to reviews

Title: A comparison of course-related stressors in undergraduate problem-based learning (PBL) versus non-PBL medical programmes

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editor

Thank you for your email of 01 May 2009 containing the reviews of our manuscript *A comparison of course-related stressors in undergraduate problem-based learning (PBL) versus non-PBL medical programmes*. We would like to thank the reviewers for taking the time to read our manuscript and providing very helpful comments. We have taken all of the reviewers’ comments on board and edited the manuscript accordingly. A point by point response to their concerns follows:

Review 1 (Sadie Malick).
i) The reviewer feels that we have not clearly acknowledged the work upon which we are building, but that we have recommended what more needs to be done. Several papers have been published looking at the stressors faced by medical students during their time at medical school, including one focused on students on a PBL programme. We have referred to these in the background to our study (page 4, paragraph 2, 3). However, to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study to directly compare the stressors perceived by medical students on PBL and non-PBL programmes in the UK.

ii) The reviewer feels that the quality of our written English is not acceptable for publication. We have carefully reviewed our written English. We hope the standard is now acceptable.

Review 2 (Kausik Das).
i) We agree with the reviewer’s comments about the style of the stressor questions. However, our measure was created by combining questions from two existing medical student stress questionnaires and we felt it was important to retain their wording rather than compromise the validity of the questions.

ii) We agree with the reviewer’s comment that it is heartening to see that the majority of non-PBL students disagree that the course relies on passive reception of knowledge rather than active learning (Q7). We have added this to the Discussion (page 13, paragraph 2).

iii) We agree with the reviewer’s comments about the role of the teacher in PBL courses. We have added this to the Implications and Recommendations section of the manuscript (on page 14).

Review 3 (Carl J Lombard).
i) The aim of our study was to investigate the frequency of individual stressors in PBL v non-PBL medical students rather than a summated stressor score. Therefore, we agree with the reviewer that in this case the reporting of Cronbach’s Alpha as a measure of validity is unnecessary. Accordingly, we have corrected the use of the word ‘items’ to describe the individual questions throughout the manuscript.

ii) We agree with the reviewer’s comments that we have not sampled the continuum between the extremes of PBL and non-PBL. We have added this to the Limitations section on page 14.

iii) We agree with the reviewer’s comments that we should provide more information about how we ascertained the information to classify the programmes as PBL and non-PBL. We have added this to the Methods section (paragraph 3, page 5).

iv) We have explained in a sentence in the Results section that there were no significant relationships between any of the demographic variables and the stressor questions (page 10, paragraph 2). However we have not presented these individual analyses of possible confounders as there are many analyses showing no significant results. We felt that to include these would be redundant. However, we are happy to do so if you think they would be of interest to your readers.

iv) We agree with the reviewer that we could present the crude odds ratios and confidence intervals in Table 2. We have now included these (page 20).
v) We agree with the reviewer that logistic regression provides a predictive model, however we understand that this is an appropriate method of analyzing this type of data. We thank the reviewer for the suggestion that the data of our study lends itself well to a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), and we agree that this is an interesting suggestion. However, we understand that logistic regression answers our research question and that MCA would yield similar results. We are therefore happy to stick with logistic regression and we feel that the readers of BMC Medical Education will be more familiar with logistic regression than MCA.

vi) The reviewer agrees with reviewer 1 that the quality of our written English is not acceptable for publication. We have carefully reviewed our written English. We hope the standard is now acceptable.

We have revised the Competing Interest section as requested (page 16).

We have documented informed consent in the Methods section (page 6, paragraph 2).

We have ensured that our revised manuscript conforms to the journal style.

We would be most grateful if you would consider our revised manuscript for publication in BMC Medical Education.

Yours Sincerely

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