Reviewer's report

Title: Attitudes and self-reported behaviours of medical college students regarding academic misconduct: a cross-sectional study revealing differences based on gender, year of study and type of institution

Version: 3 Date: 17 October 2013

Reviewer: Ioannis Dimoliatis

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AIM of THE STUDY

From the last introduction sentence I understand that study’s goal is “to assess the prevailing attitudes and self-reported behaviours of medical students in public and private institutions in Pakistan regarding academic misconduct”. However, from the whole paper I felt a predisposition against public and in favor of private. For me, the situation became clear in the first paragraph of the Discussion, where it is stated that in the private institution “a formal ethics/bioethics curriculum included as part of the longitudinal themes that run throughout the five years” while the public institution “has no formal ethics curriculum”, and in the last sentence of the Conclusion where “development and implementation of formal ethics curricula” is stated. It seems to me that the underlying cause of this study was to assess whether teaching ethics had an impact on academic misconduct. If yes, the comparison is not public VS private school, but taught VS not taught ethics, and this is a completely different thing: the findings might be the same if both institution were private, the one teaching ethics and the other not, OR both public, the one teaching ethics and the other not. If the underlying question to be answered was “does teaching ethics improve students’ attitudes and behaviours?”, firstly this should be stated in the title (e.g., “Impact of teaching ethics on medical students’ attitudes and behavior regarding academic misconduct”) and in the last sentence of the Introduction, and secondly the analysis and reporting should be re-orientated, e.g., the variable “type of institution” (private/ public) should be replaced by “taught ethics” (yes/no); i.e. “is students’ attitude/behavior (ab) a function of having taught ethics (te)?” In short: ab=f(te). However other variables should be considered: females might be more ethical, thus include gender in the equation, ab=f(te, gender), or preclinical students less ethical, thus, ab=f(te, gender, year of study). In addition, the institution differences described in the first paragraph of the Discussion should be taken into account: ab=(te, gender, year, educational background [diverse/ not diverse], curriculum [spiral/ not spiral], size of class [100/250], etc). If the question to be answered is ab=f(te), then all other variables should be treated as confounders (at least gender, and preclinical/clinical phase), and a more appropriate analysis should be done.

RESULTS

I think that the best presentation of tables 2-4 might be a sentence like <<
Results on plagiarism are shown in Table 2. >> and another helping reader how to read and understand the table, for example explaining its first line: << In the first scenario, regarding attitude, from the 452 students who stated their gender (200 males and 252 females), 204 (45%) answered that "the student [of the scenario] is wrong", 86 (43%) male and 118 (47%) female (NS). From the 457 students who stated their class (### basic and ### clinical), 207 (45%) answered that "the student is wrong", 120 (46%) male and 87 (45%) female (NS). And from the 457 students from both colleges (### private and ### public), 207 (45%) answered that "the student is wrong", 138 (53%) private and 69 (35%) public (p<0.05). All scenarios are read in the same way. Significant differences are in bold. >> And a similar paragraph for Tables 3 and 4. No more text is needed (except if other analysis is performed). This has also the advantage of avoiding (i) inconsistencies between tables and text, (ii) selective reporting in the text of some significant differences (e.g. by college) and silencing others (e.g. by gender or class), thus misleading readers from the whole picture, especially those who don’t use to read themselves (and understand) the tables, and (iii) mixing results and discussion.

OTHER COMMENTS attached.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

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

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.