Reviewer’s report

Title: Four minutes for a patient, twenty seconds for a relative - an observational study at an university hospital

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Reviewer: Sara Willems

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A clearer understanding of doctor-patient communication in the hospital setting might contribute to interventions/actions to improve quality of communication, patient satisfaction and –in the end- quality of care. This study adds to this understanding by focussing on a limited aspect of this theme namely the time spenditure of doctors.

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

Nevertheless this is a potentially interesting study, it lacks more theoretical background on doctor-patient communication in general, and communication research in the hospital setting in particular. The paper also lacks detailed information on the methods used and inconsistencies in the reported numbers. I see these three points to be addressed as essential in order to accept the paper for publication.

Concerning the methods and data analysis:
- p. 3: standardised methods were used ...
  in what way were the used methods standardised?
- How was the coding system developed?

What exactly is meant by “practical activities”?

Are codes mutually exclusive? One could imagine that a doctor performs two tasks at the same time
- Exactly how was the time use recorded? Did the used method allow to collect reliable data?
- Did the doctors know about the aim of the study? If so, is there a risk for adapted behaviour?
- p. 3: The wards and physicians were randomly chosen every day. How?
- p.3: If there were several interns working on the same ward, the intern ...
  When is the random choice than applied?
- P.4: All measurements were collected in a database and checked by two independent persons.
  What exactly was checked?
- Would the mean time spend on relatives not be a more clinical relevant number if the number of contacts with relatives was taken into account? (if there is a contact with relatives, it takes ... mins) Now the variance between doctors seems enormous.

- Why did you chose to observe two doctors two times? (apart from the practical reason that they moved wards) Does this not create some clustering effect?

- To calculate the mean time per patient, why dividing by the number of patients in the ward and not by the number of patients the doctor talked too? Would this be more logic to do as the mean point of interest is the time expenditure of the doctor, not the attention each patient gets?

Results:
- P. 5: ... communications with relatives was 5 minutes etc (32.32 – 147.45 min for etc) Indicate what the numbers between brackets mean. Variance? CI?

- It is unclear whether time for breaks is included in the working time. If so, under what code was it categorised? Other?

Concerning the reported numbers:
- Abstract: 36 wards and 34 doctors
Methods: 36 wards, 34 doctors
Results: 34 wards, 32 doctors
Table 2: n=31

Was the study approved by an ethics committee?

Here and there statements are made without any context, nuance or critical perspective.

For example p. 3: Quality time between physician and patient is an increasingly valuable resource. Why? In what way? Reference?

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS:

The paper is sometimes difficult to read because of language matters such as the lack of words or commas, the use of abbreviations which are not spelled out, strange word choice and incorrect grammar.

Some examples:
- DRG
- p.3: Before study was started, the method was piloted on eight wards ...
- time of professional life

A language check by a native speaker would certainly solve most of these problems.

Indicate more clearly what the tables are representing.
E.g. table 2: nowhere is stated that this concerns the doctors in the study.

Thank you for sending me this paper and looking forward to your reactions!

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.