Reviewer's report

Title: Accuracy of responses from postal surveys about continuing medical education and information behavior: experiences from a survey among German diabetologists

Authors:

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Reviewer: Dr Eileen Kaner

Level of interest: A paper of limited interest

Advice on publication: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the compulsory revisions

Comments on S. Trelle - Accuracy of responses from postal surveys about continuing medical education and information behaviour: experiences from a survey among German diabetologists.

This study aimed to assess the accuracy of physicians in response to a postal survey about CME. the introduction was well written and the subject matter is likely to be of some interest to the BMC readership.

Methodology

Broadly, this took the form of identifying inconsistencies in responses to logically connected questions about CME plus responses about familiarity with a fictitious technical term.

The survey had a low response rate of 52%, although this improved ito 57% if just eligible subjects were considered. However, an assessment of respondents against the original the sample and the broader population of German diabetologists, plus significant differences between responders and non-responders, indicated that respondents to this survey were not particularly representative of diabetologists more generally.

I was also confused about the way that the sample size calculation was described in the methods.

I also would have liked more detail about the provenance of the survey instrument including whether any assessment was made about its validity and reliability.

Results

My main query about this study was whether the instrument was measuring what it purported to. For example, the author pointed to the discrepancy in the total time spent on CME and time spent reading journals, as being logically inconsistent. However, this conclusion discounted any possibility that physicians might read for general interest (e.g. BMJ filler articles/obituaries etc) rather than for edification or that they might include time reading job or product advertisements in their answer.
The authors do report that some of the inconsistencies that they found in responses might be due to carelessness in reading the questionnaire. Since the current study had no way of confirming or disconfirming this, I felt that some of the study conclusions ventured rather further than the available data.

Finally, I had reservation about the fictitious technical term used in this study since it may have led to ambiguity in responses. I wondered if the respondents might have confused this with a McNemar's statistical test or if they may have felt that the researchers had been confused about the name; particularly since positive responders to this items were amongst the highest knowledge scorers and were willing to admit knowledge gaps.

Discussion

As a result of the above comments I think that the discussion may need some amendment and conclusions qualified a little more. Furthermore, the abstract points to a substantial portion of responses being inaccurate whilst later text suggests that this is a more modest 5-10%.

Competing interests:

None declared.