Reviewer’s report

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

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Version: 3 Date: 22 Jul 2002

Reviewer: Dr Eileen Kaner

Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Advice on publication: Other (see below)

I think that a fundamental issue arises in this type of study, where one is checking responder performance, and that is the need to disentangle possible flaws in the questioning process or questionnaire from those of subjects responding to it. I think that the findings of this study are interesting, but the authors need to examine more fully their instrument and methodology as well as the responses of the busy practitioners in the study. For instance, it is well known that the length of a questionnaire has an influence on the accuracy of responses to it. From my reading of this paper, the instrument had 92 items (including three open questions), could the length of the instrument have contributed to the inaccuracy rate found?

I'm pleased to see that publication relating to the questionnaire and I think this enhanced the present study but I would have liked a little more description in this paper of the research team and expert panel that was consulted during questionnaire development - were any practising diabetologists included?

Given that the entirety of this study is based on the issue of survey bias, I think it is necessary for the author to do this subject more justice in their report. For instance, in the abstract it is said that non-response-bias was possible but unlikely, with no further explanation and little more in the discussion. I think that non-responder bias is important for the interpretation of this study, particularly since it is known that non-responders in physician surveys tend to be older, more experienced, less well-qualified and more stressed than responders. Hence there could well be differences in response patterns between the two groups and I think this point is slightly more important than whether responders mirrored the original sample which may have contained systematic biases as discussed. By the way, I found it difficult to assess if difference in table 1 were significant or not from the data presented.

Given that much of the paper is concerned with the issues of socially desirable responses, acquiescence and response-set bias (yes & no answers) it would be helpful to have a little more explanation of these terms in the introduction. In particular, I felt uncertain as to how acquiescence would manifest itself in this survey.
In the appendix, it would be useful to point out that this is a distilled (reduced) form of the actual questionnaire to show only the relevant questions for the current report. I felt that question 3 (please indicate your position) was a little ambiguously worded would ‘current understanding’ have been more precise. Also, could the possible responses be open to misinterpretation in terms on the precision of understanding being sought. I have published papers on some issues that I have some understanding of but would not go so far as to say that my understanding was full.

I found the scoring system on page 7 tricky to understand and it took me some time to figure out that the 7 other items were included in this. Could a bracket be added to the text to help the reader?

A specific comment relating to tables 3 & 4. I found the use of ‘positive responses’ to refer to inconsistent responses a little confusing, would discrepant responses be a more helpful term here?

In the conclusion, until some of the methodological points above are ironed-out I'm not sure that I'd say the method was appropriate and feasible for others to follow. I think I would say that this study is a useful first step in the process of understanding the quality of survey responses and that qualitative exploration would further improve our understanding of the processes involved.

Lastly, I think that the abstract for this paper needs a little enhancement particularly in the results section.

**Competing interests:**

None declared.