Reviewer's report

Title: Evolution of Patients' Complaints in a French University Hospital: Before and After Study of the Impact of a Law Regarding Patients’ Rights

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Reviewer: Wayne Kenneth Cunningham

Reviewer's report:

This is a very interesting paper. I like it. A widely held belief is that complainants are largely interested in making sure that an event doesn't happen again to someone else. Even if this is true (which I personally doubt) complainants must have some basis on which they can complain- incompetance, rudeness, poor communication or whatever. This study from France helps answer the question of just what it is that complainants are on about- in this case, a perception of medical error.

What the study (because of its design) cannot answer, is the process that influences the complainant on the journey between perceiving medical error and actually making a complaint. What factors (quality of communication, the relationship between doctor and patient, or whatever) impact on that decision making process? This paper draws attention to the role of legislation, and the public awareness of that. In New Zealand, the so-called Cartwright Inquiry in the mid 1980’s drew attention to poor medical practice, and the subsequent law changes led to huge increases in the rate of complaints against doctors. This French study considers before/after rates associated with law changes, and is commendable for considering that issue.

I would like to suggest a discretionary revision- consideration of potential bias and impact on the process of coding the written complaints- who read the raw data, decided on the coding, was that process verified and so on? If the authors could include a line or two about that in the method section it would help.

The authors’ final conclusion, that patient safety can be improved by considering complaints as a useful tool to identify where improvements might be made, is excellent. The next challenge to be tackled by regulators and the profession, is how to utilise complaints in a way that is not damaging to health care providers, and allows them to learn and improve their practice appropriately.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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