Reviewer's report

Title: Response rates in postal surveys of healthcare professionals between 1996 and 2005: An observational study

Version: 1 Date: 26 May 2009

Reviewer: Elizabeth VanDenKerkhof

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- Minor Essential Revisions

1. The objectives are focused and clear, however the operational definition of the primary outcome measure is not clear. Logistic regression was used to assess the effect of various characteristics on response rate. It’s not clear how response rate is categorized into a binary variable for logistic regression. Therefore a clear definition of how the primary outcome variable was measured would be helpful.

2. The population studied is relevant to most healthcare professionals but I believe it could be made to be more relevant. A nursing-focused database was not searched, in spite of nurses being one of the target groups. Some, but not all nursing papers are published in Medline; however Cinahl is the primary nursing database. This issue should be addressed or at least acknowledged as a limitation.

3. Break down study sample size into smaller groups. The category <1000 includes 254 of the 350 studies. This may have been done for statistical purposes; however, as indicated by the large number of studies falling into this category, the majority of surveys in healthcare are much smaller in scale than the large population-based studies. Therefore, more granularity in terms of sample sizes smaller than 1000 would increase the relevance of these findings for the majority of HC professionals and researchers embarking on a survey.

4. How were mixed survey designs handled? For example:
   a. Studies that included both a mailed and electronic component.
   b. Studies with telephone follow-up

5. Did more than 1 assessor review the studies to be included?

6. On page 7, 2 large studies (1 US and 1 Canada) were excluded due to undue influence. It would be interesting to discuss how these 2 studies compare to the final results of this analysis. Do they support the results?

7. Which countries are included in “others”? This represents 138 studies and countries outside of UK/Ireland and USA cannot assess the relevance of these studies to their setting. Could the classification be made more relevant to others, e.g., Europe, North America, UK/Ireland, etc.

- Discretionary Revisions
8. One third of the studies (108) did not provide information about length, yet this group had the highest response rate. Consider including this “unknown” group in the bivariable and possibly multivariable analysis, rather than excluding it from the analysis.

9. Was the quality of the studies assessed in terms of sampling strategies – convenience sample versus random sample?

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

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.