Author's response to reviews

Title: A comparative study of Taiwan's short-term medical missions to the South Pacific and Central America

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Reply to Reviewer 1 (Jeremy Snyder)

This paper discusses an important and under-studied issue – short term medical missions. The paper has very serious problems that prevent it from meriting publication in its current form. The paper presents too little background on short term medical missions to properly place the existing study in the existing literature on the topic. Most importantly, the paper offers a general overview of Taiwanese missions, but provides too little information on how this information was gathered and does not support the very broad conclusions made in the discussion section.

Reply: Thank you for the remark.

Major Concerns:
The aim of the paper is stated in very general terms and the aims expressed in the abstract and main text do not match. In the abstract, the aim of the paper is stated as: “Our primary objective is to describe and identify useful strategies for conducting STMMs in the future.” In the main text: “To determine the current scope and content of Taiwan’s STMMs”.

Reply: Thank you for the advice. We have revised the manuscript to match the aim of our study (page 2, lines 4-6; and page 4, lines 2-4).

The introduction should include much more information on concerns that have been expressed regarding the impacts of STMMs.

Reply: Thank you for the recommendation. In this revised introduction, we have addressed more details regarding the beneficial impacts of STMMs (page 3, lines 3-7).

Much more detail is needed about how the constraints in table six were measured and what information was asked of participants.

Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised manuscript, we have replaced the data of Table 6 with result basing on a questionnaire survey. This questionnaire survey can reduce the possible bias of interpretation by reviewing the daily reports of STMMs. In addition, we have provided more details in what questions were asked in our questionnaire survey (pages 7-8 of methods; pages 9-10 of results; and Tables 5-6). We believe this questionnaire survey can add
valuable information in the expression of STMMs’ efficiency.

Explain in more detail the justification for the claim, in the second sentence of the discussion, that “Our results demonstrate that STMMs established by the TaiwanICDF are well planned and effective in providing health care and education to host nations.”

Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised text, we have modified the sentence in the discussion (page 10, lines 3-6 of discussion section).

Explain the justification for the claim on p. 9 that “Our study demonstrated that the quality of clinical service provided by STMMs from multiple institutions was as effective as that of those from a single institution.”

Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised text, we have explained the sentence in the discussion (page 12, lines 1-4).

Explain the justification for the claim on pp. 9-10 that “Secondly, our results indicate that education can help local health workers to improve their knowledge and skills in health care. Activities such as teacher training are as important as individual encounters with patients.”

Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised text, we have modified the sentence in the discussion (page 12, third paragraph, lines 1-2).

Minor Concerns:
There are grammatical mistakes throughout the paper that must be corrected.
Reply: Thank you for the comment. We have had a professional English editor help us revise the current manuscript.
Reply to Reviewer 2 (Alexandra Martiniuk)

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper which reports on STMMs. The paper reports that an increasing number of short-term medical missions (STMMs) are being dispatched from Taiwan to its allied nations to provide humanitarian health care; however, overall evaluations done to strengthen the impact of STMMs are lacking. The paper aims to describe and identify useful strategies for conducting STMMs in the future. Strengths of this study are the topic, which is of global interest and where there is little quantitative data. As well, a strength of this study is the rigorous study sample of all Taiwan govt STMMs --- interesting to have an Asian perspective on this topic and unique dataset to add to the knowledge on STMMs globally. Specifically, this paper reports upon official reports of 46 missions to 11 countries in Central America and 25 missions to 8 countries in the South Pacific were investigated.

Reply: We highly appreciate the kind comment.

Major Compulsory Revisions:
The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached. For example, additional necessary experiments or controls, statistical mistakes, errors in interpretation.

Reply: Thank you for the thoughtful advice. In this revised manuscript, we have added the results of a questionnaire survey that investigated the efficiency of STMMs. This survey can reduce the possible bias of interpretation by reviewing the daily reports of STMMs. We believe this questionnaire survey can add valuable information in the expression of STMM. In addition, we have mentioned the study limitation in the discussion section (page 13, second paragraph).

Should reference the following paper:
Brain Gains: a literature review of medical missions to low and middle-income countries.
Martiniuk AL, Manouchehrian M, Negin JA, Zwi AB.
BMC Health Serv Res. 2012 May 29;12:134.

Reply: Thank you for the kind recommendation. We have cited this article as an important reference in our revised manuscript (page 16, reference 4).
The sentence "Our results demonstrate that STMMs established by the TaiwanICDF are well planned and effective in providing health care and education to host nations" ..... Overstates the findings from this paper --- no data are presented which critically evaluate the STMMs or their planning
Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised text, we have modified this sentence and just stated the evidence presented in our results (page 10, lines 3-6 of discussion section)

The below sentence should be referenced or made clearer that this is the opinion of the authors". The deployment of Taiwanese STMMs is based on Taiwan’s strategic interests and is designed to rally international support to break through diplomatic barriers set by the People’s Republic of China.”
Reply: Thank you for the advice. In this revised manuscript, we have cited a couple of references (page 11, line 18, references 21&23) and made the sentences clearer (page 11, second paragraph)

The below sentence in Discussion was not really a key aspect of the paper as indicated by authors in the objectives. Suggest that authors clarify the objectives of the paper early on in the writing and to keep consistent throughout: ".....knowledge, this is the first survey to compare the recruitment of STMMs from multiple institutions to those from single institutions." ............... I am also not sure that this is valuable information offered by this paper and thus seems strange to highlight that this is the first paper to look at this
Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised manuscript, we have scraped the sentence as your recommendation (page 11).

The below sentence could benefit from critical reflection upon the articles cited -- were these strong research methods? "Some research demonstrates that teaching is the most effective role played by STMMs [11,23,24], with capacity building – through partnerships with local health workers – being the most valuable"
Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised manuscript, we have modified the sentence to reflect the cited articles (page 12, third paragraph, lines
4-6; references 1, 14, 26, 27).

Reference 4 uses inconsistent style
Reply: Thank you for the correction (page 12, third paragraph).

Do not need Table 1.
In general the written results should better reflect and summarize the data presented in the tables
Reply: Thank you for the advice. In this revised text, we have removed Table 1 as your recommendation.

Table 6
Says values are percent -- these seem small for % As well providing the questions / questionnaire either as appendix or in methods would be useful.
Reply: Thank you for the advice. In this revised text, we have replaced Table 6 with results from a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire survey has been addressed in the method section (pages 7-8). The revised Tables are presented with values and percent as your recommendation.

Minor Essential Revisions:
The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.
Reply: Thank you for the comment. We have carefully examined the above conditions throughout the whole manuscript.

Sentence has poor grammar: imperative that an understanding of beneficial partnerships between the humanitarian organization and its host country
Reply: Thank you for the comment. We have had a professional English editor help us revise the current manuscript.

The Methods section appears to contain more "background" or Results – suggest moving all but study methods into new section
Reply: Thank you for the advice. We have revised the manuscript as your recommendation (pages 4-6).

Overall paper needs to be edited by English speaker. Few typos eg "structure" in Results.
Reply: Thank you for the comment. We have had a professional English editor help us revise the current manuscript.
Reply to Reviewer 3 (Ben White)

Overall, the authors should be commended for their efforts in attempting to improve the quality of STMMS through more effectively characterizing and defining their long experience. In addition, the extant literature is well reviewed in the introduction, and it is clear that the authors have an excellent sense for the current issues with respect to STMMs and their effects. Finally, the authors are fortunate to have a very large data set (sample size) to analyze (71 volumes over 5 years), and as such are in the position to draw some very interesting conclusions.

Reply: Thank you for the kind remark.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1) It is worth noting that despite the above, the conclusions drawn by the authors are not surprising, like the necessity of speaking the local language, or the importance of creating sustainability through expanding capacity of local healthcare workers through train-the-trainer models and local education. In order for this manuscript to be of interest to the readership, and pass the “so what” test, it will be necessary to prove something that they do not already know, such as the potential sustainability of this work, or even something as simple as how table 6 was created, why it is so, and what can be done to improve it in the future.

Reply: Thank you for the recommendations. In this revised manuscript, we have added results from a questionnaire survey that investigated the efficiency of STMMs. This survey can reduce the possible bias of interpretation by reviewing the daily reports of STMMs. We believe this questionnaire survey can add valuable information in the expression of STMMs’ efficiency.

2) In addition, in some cases there is a tenuous link between the results as written and the conclusions drawn. For example, the term “effective” is used frequently without a clear definition or data to support said definition. (e.g. abstract conclusions sentence 1, or the line “In this study, we used a comparative survey to investigate the effectiveness of STMMs. Our study demonstrated that the quality of clinical service provided by STMMs from multiple institutions was as effective as that of those from a single institution.” If these conclusions are to be stated, they would benefit for a clearer definition.

Reply: Thank you for the recommendation. In this revised manuscript, we have
replaced “effectiveness” with “efficiency” (page 12, lines 1 and 2). The definition of efficiency has been addressed in the revised methods section (page 7, lines 2-4 from the bottom). In addition, we have replaced “effective” with “efficient” (page 2, line 2 of conclusion; page 10, line 5 of discussion section; page 12, line 4; and page 13, line 4 of conclusion section).

Minor Essential Revisions:
1) There are a few spelling errors that will be detected by a common spell-checker.
Reply: Thank you for the comment. We have had a professional English editor help us revise the current manuscript.

2) “Other characteristics – including funding sources, leadership, administration, logistical preparedness and orientation – carried no difference.”
Carried used incorrectly.
Reply: Thank you for the comment. In this revised manuscript, we have rewritten the sentence as “There was no difference in the funding sources, leadership, administration, logistical preparedness, or orientation between the two regions” (page 5, last 2 lines).