Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 1 October 2012

Reviewer: Alexandra Martiniuk

Reviewer's report:

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 STMSSs 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.

- 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.

Should reference the following paper:

Brain Gains: a literature review of medical missions to low and middle-income countries.

Martiniuk AL, Manouchehri M, Negin JA, Zwi AB. 
BMC Health Serv Res. 2012 May 29;12:134. 

Since there are no hypotheses being tested, instead this is qualitative/descriptive data --- the p values in the below sentence as well as sentences following in the paper---are of little use..........There were significant differences in the structure of STMMs -- including the number of mission member (p < 0.01), patient (p < 0.001), and location (p < 0.01).

Discussion section

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

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."

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

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"

Reference 4 uses inconsistent style

Tables

Do not need Table 1

In general the written results should better reflect and summarize the data presented in the tables

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

- 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.

Sentence has poor grammar: imperative that an understanding of beneficial partnerships between the humanitarian organization and its host country

The Methods section appears to contain more "background" or Results - suggest moving all but study methods into new section

Overall papers needs to be edited by English speaker Few typos eg "structure" in
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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"