Reviewer's report

Title: Future career plans of Malawian medical students: a cross-sectional survey

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Reviewer: Reem Mustafa

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In this study titled “Future career plans of Malawian medical students: a cross-sectional survey” by Kate L Mandeville and colleagues, the investigators explored postgraduate intentions of current medical students in Malawi. This is a very important study and the question posed by the authors is of interest. Considering the results by the Malawian policy makers will have implications when addressing the issue of physician shortage in that area.

- Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached).

- Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
  • In this report the response rate was low overall (48%). The investigators need to explore the differences between respondents and non-respondents. These differences can be explored by evaluating the differences between the respondents and the overall student population at that time. For example, gender, type of secondary school education, type of premedical school education (A-level, premedical year..etc). This information is usually available in the medical school registration departments and will help identify potential biases and the direction of the effect of these biases if we understand the differences among these groups.
  • It is important to report the response rate in the abstract
  • In the background second and fourth paragraph there is a discrepancy that needs to be corrected. In the second paragraph the authors mention that the national medical school opened in 1992. While in the fourth paragraph they mention that the school was founded in 1991.
  • Under the results section, there is a subheading of background. This may be confusing to readers. It is best if the authors can describe all background information in the background or in the method section under population and setting.
  • Under the results section and the subheading of future plans, please refer to figure 5 which summarizes the results of future plans.
  • In the discussion section, it will be helpful if the authors explored additional reasons for the differences between the intentions in premedical students and
the medical students. Does the admission committee for medical school view these intentions negatively? In the sixth paragraph the authors mentioned that socially desirable responses were less likely due to the anonymous nature of the survey. They need to consider this type of the bias when exploring reasons for the differences among premedical and medical students

- The study is underpowered to detect a trend for year of study against immediate plans. The author should comment on the lack of significance as an issue of lack of power rather than lack of trend.

- Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

  - It will be helpful to give some details about how did the investigators select the students for the focus group to develop the questionnaire?
  
  - In the results section, is it better to mention the results as they are without the authors’ impression. For example under the subheading of future plans, the author could simply say 47% of medical students intend to practice in Malawi after graduation. However, 31.5% intend to immediately train elsewhere...

**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