Reviewer's report

Title: Rural outreach by specialist doctors in Australia: a national cross-sectional study of supply and distribution

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Reviewer: Hugh R Taylor

Reviewer's report:

The authors have undertaken an interesting study looking at the characteristics of Australian medical specialists who provide outreach services. This is the first study of this kind and it presents some interesting and useful information. They emphasise the need to consider their findings in the planning of further services.

Although this is a well written and well presented paper and some of the limitations of the study are mentioned, there is a major problem that is not addressed and that relates to possible selection bias in those specialists who responded. With only 22% of specialists responding to the survey, their findings are highly susceptible to selection bias.

One method to explore the impact of such bias would be to look at the percentage response to the survey by those in the different key co-variants of interest such as gender, age, location of residence, years of rural background, practice management and particularly by specialist type. It would be reassuring if the response rate was more or less similar across each of these variables. However, if, for example, there was a much higher response rate in old male general surgeons living in outer regional areas, the results could be quite distorted.

This analysis should be easy to undertake and present and some issues raised in the Discussion about this.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest 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.