Reviewer’s report

Title: Exploring physician specialist response rates to web-based surveys

Version: 1
Date: 17 November 2014

Reviewer: Justin Presseau

Reviewer’s report:

The manuscript reports the detailed response rates of an online questionnaire disseminated to specialist physicians, and reports details of the reasons for non-response in a subset of non-respondents. I have reviewed a previous version of this manuscript and have re-read this version with interest.

Major compulsory revisions

1. Overall the authors have done a good job in addressing most of the comments I made in the last version and I agree this is an improved version. Nevertheless, it remains unclear what specifically this manuscript adds to the literature. The authors have done a good job in updating their literature review to include a number of systematic reviews of response rate-based studies, and argue that the findings are consistent with these reviews. While now providing a broader picture of the literature in terms of systematic reviews, the reader remains left wondering what the reported study adds that is not already more comprehensively addressed by the cited systematic reviews – could this be made more explicit?

2. There is a lack of consideration of why there should be differential effects by medical specialty. As a result it is not clear whether the findings are specific to the sample in this study or generalizable to other similar specialities. Further discussion of why differential responses were observed may help future studies.

3. There is a need to better situate the exploratory design within the broader set of studies that use more robust methods, perhaps in the limitations section (this is touched upon but could be expanded beyond acknowledging the lack of a comparison group). As there was no experimental manipulation of any factors used to increase response rates, any inference drawn about the potential drives of the degree of response observed remains highly speculative (e.g. the added sentence in the abstract ‘smaller monetary incentives for each individual may be a more appropriate way to increase response rates’ cannot be supported by the design used in the present study).

The issue of survey responses by health professionals is an important methodological area to explore and certainly the advent of online data collection methods lends itself well to further options. However, as a standalone exploration of response rates and based on the design concerns listed above, I am not yet convinced that this manuscript sufficiently contributes to the literature on response rates in health professional samples.
Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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