Reviewer's report

Title: Teaching surgical clerks: an analysis of sustaining knowledge for future non-surgeons

Version: 2 Date: 9 September 2014

Reviewer: Hazim Sadideen

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this article. This is a very interesting topic the authors have explored, and the overall message is useful. Some recommendations have been made in light of the format requested, and I hope that the authors find these useful.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

Q. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
A. I would recommend that the title is changed to “The surgical experience gained at medical school of current non-surgeons: a survey analysis” or something to this effect, because ultimately this is what they really looked at in this paper.

This title change has been suggested because 1) an effective qualitative analysis would have included a form of interviewing of participants, which the authors acknowledge was a limitation of their study; 2) this was a survey-based study, with a focus on analysing qualitative comments (and so with the title change, the authors' introduction and methodology could more clearly mention this); 3) the sample interviewed were “historically” medical students, and currently non-surgeons (hence changing the word future to current).

Q. Are the data sound?
A. The data reporting requires some further clarification please. There is no control group in this study. Although as a qualitative study this may appear less important, however educationalists and readers would want to know what the difference (and similarities), if any, would have been amongst current surgeons and non-surgeons from the same medical schools. Furthermore, it was not clear whether the survey explored the role or presence of other surgical courses that were offered at any of these medical schools e.g. surgical suturing/practical skills courses/simulation alongside the normal surgical curriculum. This may have influenced the reported rankings of practical skills/scrubbing as a useful taught skill. We note from the manuscript that currently most German medical schools offer students surgical simulation classes.

In addition, one important question would have been “did you ever consider a career in surgery whilst a student in medical school” because it must be noted that some physicians change career plans. This is because it cannot
automatically be deduced that a current non-surgeon never considered a surgical career previously.

Within the current data body it would be useful if Table 3 was annotated and further expanded e.g. what does n signify? (… page 4 briefly mentions the methodology, but this needs to be explained again e.g. number of responses in total in this category identified as a learning objective?) Could the authors also please reference the other Tables within their results sections, so that readers know when to look at the tables.

Minor Essential Revisions

Q. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

A. Using a survey is an appropriate method to gather such information, particularly when the original sample cohort was 153 (who it was sent out to; 67 returned responses). However as known surveys have their weaknesses too, which should be addressed in the discussion. It would be useful if the authors’ could please expand on some aspects of methodology e.g. how many people analysed the data/who “rechecked” the data/ the “basic recommendations of Mayring’s content analysis” would be useful e.g. type e.g. coding/thematic analysis as one would perform for qualitative interviews. These small additions make the explanation of their methodology process more robust.

Discretionary Revisions

On a separate note, it would have been interesting to compare different groups, or mention in the discussion that one can not categorise the above specialties as “non-surgeons” and make conclusions with regards to non-surgeons. For example, accident and emergency/obstetrics & gynaecology specialists may have provided some interesting insight into the above perspectives, as perhaps they may have acquired benefit from their surgical rotations in medical school, but are a group who were not addressed. Although it is noted that they may have been excluded as they rotated through a postgraduate surgical clerkship.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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