Reviewer’s report

Title: Psychological distress among medical students in conflicts: a cross-sectional study from Syria

Version: 1 Date: 08 Dec 2016

Reviewer: Marta Buszewicz

Reviewer's report:

I thought that this was a well-written paper and very impressive in its quality and production given the very difficult political circumstances which the authors are living and working under. I do have a few queries and suggestions for revisions:

(1) Introduction - end of first paragraph, page 3. I think the authors should clarify what they mean by the term 'student abuse'. Is this verbal abuse / humiliation by their teachers and/or peers in a medical school context or would other forms of abuse which might be experienced by anyone their age also be included?

(2) The authors state that 350 student responses were included and give the breakdown between male and female respondents, but I was uncertain as to the total number of students approached to participate.

I think this total number is important to include so that a response rate to the questionnaire can be calculated.

It would be helpful to also have this denominator and the response rate for each year of study approached.

From the number of respondents given the response rate looks to be lower in the third and sixth years of study and possible reasons for this might be suggested - maybe exam or other pressures?

(3) In the Results section first paragraph on page 7, the authors suggest that there were 'roughly close proportions of males and females represented', but I think that 42.3 and 57.7% are not really very similar. What would be useful to know is to what degree this matches the percentages of male and female students within the medical school.

(4) The statistical results look OK to me as presented, but I am not a statistician so it might be a good idea to have them reviewed by someone who is expert in the field, particularly as a large number of analyses have been carried out.
Discussion: I would suggest that the authors might put the first paragraph about the impacts of war on the Syrian population (page 9) together with the later discussion about the effects of the Syrian war on the medical students who participated in the study (page 12). This section could either come at the beginning of the discussion or towards the end which is where it is mainly focused and may logically sit, given there didn't seem to be hard evidence of the impact of the war on the medical students' well-being. I would however query this interpretation of the data somewhat, as I think this conclusion was based on the students not apparently being significantly psychologically affected by the impact of harm coming to first-degree relatives or the financial consequences of the war. Given that the levels of psychological morbidity were extremely high in this group of medical students, particularly as regards depression, I would suggest that this might be linked with the extreme stress of living in a country riven by war, if not the specific factors asked about, and I think this could be discussed a bit further in the paper.

I think it might also be helpful to give some comparative figures for levels of depression and anxiety from other studies of medical students within the discussion. The papers referenced appear to mainly cover students in middle eastern and Asian communities where the political situation is not always very stable and I wonder if this is a factor.

Certainly in our study in the UK levels of depression amongst medical students were significantly lower than in this study (16.4% had moderate or severe depression likely to be equivalent to the categorisation in this study) while the rates were in fact higher in non-medical students (30.4% having symptoms of moderate or severe depression) [ref.].

Limitations: I didn't quite understand the point being made in the first sentence at the bottom of page 12, as my understanding from reference 1 in this paper (Guthrie et al.) is that the first year may be among the most stressful time for medical students, but this may not be the case if it's a pre-medical preparatory year in Syria, in which case it would be fine to leave it out and isn't really a limitation.

I think the percentage response rate and whether or not the respondents can be considered representative of the medical school population as a whole should probably be discussed in this section.

(6) I thought that the English was generally very good, but there were a few areas where corrections might be helpful - perhaps it could be read through by an English native speaker if possible.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

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