Reviewer’s report

Title: Planning for self-sufficiency of the rural medical workforce in Australia: findings of ten years’ MABEL evidence

Version: 0 Date: 07 Oct 2018

Reviewer: Rubeshan Perumal

Reviewer's report:

The authors address a critical issue facing healthcare systems globally; the work is locally responsive and globally relevant. In particular, the paper takes a balanced view on the imperative, especially by high income countries, to ensure an equitable global distribution of the healthcare workforce. It draws on one of the largest and most comprehensive programs which provides robust cohort data on the national healthcare workforce of Australia. Although the response rate was low, it is within the acceptable limits for survey-based research, and this shortcoming is compensated for by the completeness of follow-up data, which is a rarity in this field of research. While the manuscript is an insightful review of the findings of the MABEL program, it is presented as a discussion/perspective piece rather than an empirical study. Nonetheless, the work makes a worthy contribution to this nascent area of public and global health research, and is worthy of publication.

The following specific comments may strengthen the work:

Abstract

As per the author guidelines, the abstract of a research article should be structured. If this is a review/perspective manuscript, the article type should be changed to reflect this. The article type is presently reflected as "Research article".

Page 3. Line 44. "Evidence supports suggests...". Delete either "supports" or "suggests". It would be better to avoid the phrasing, "This study shows...", "Evidence suggests...", "Research evidence shows", which is found throughout the manuscript. Write a declarative statement, and cite/reference as necessary. For example, the statement in line 44 can be re-written as, "Rural self-sufficiency will be enhanced with policies of selecting rural-origin students, increasing the balance of generalist doctors, enhancing opportunities for remaining in rural areas for training, ensuring sustainable rural working conditions and using innovative service models."

Page 4. Line 5. "...implications on global workforce distribution". Change to "implications for global workforce distribution" or "impact on global workforce distribution".
Main text

The main text should be structured (Background, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion) is this is a 'research article'. It is fine as is if this a 'perspective' or 'review' piece.

Page 5. Line 47. This section would be appropriately positioned in the "Methods" section.

Page 6. Line 2. Reference is made to the original report of the MABEL cohort (Ref 6). The details of the study methods should be reported, in a summarised form, in this manuscript. The veracity of all subsequent arguments made by the authors in this manuscript depend wholly on the methodological rigour of the MABEL project. In addition, contrary to the blanket assertion that MABEL respondents are representative of all Australian doctors, the original paper (Ref 6) highlights the differential response rates by sex, clinical role, level of specialisation, and geographic work location (including a note of the financial incentive that was offered to rural doctors to participate). These limitations are important, and deserve mentioning.

Page 6. Line 5. Please include the proportion of respondents who were overseas trained, if any. If none of the doctors were overseas trained, please make specific mention that the only Australian trained doctors were included.

Page 8. Line 10. This sections starts a discussion of key findings. The results themselves are not presented, and there is no statistical analysis that is described. This section simply provides a discussion of findings presumably made elsewhere, or in another manuscript. It is the validity of this analysis which must first be assessed before any engagement on the meaning of these findings. The authors have two options in this instance; the first is to structure the manuscript as a research article and present the results (in the manuscript or as supplementary material) before leading a discussion, or alternatively, to clarify earlier in the manuscript that this is a review/perspective paper with appropriate references to the manuscript where the actual data analysis can be found.

Page 10. Line 50. "Around 19% of medical specialists participates in outreach work" should read, "Around 19% of medical specialists participate in outreach work".

Page 11. Line 11. This statement requires elaboration. Specify the proportion of small, medium-sized, and large rural workforces which are made up of OTDs, and similarly for towns and cities. Restating some of the data from Table 2 would be appropriate here.

Page 11. Line 39. This paragraph needs to be prefaced by clarification of the pre-requisites for self-sufficiency. At present, how many more doctors need to be trained in Australia for the workforce human resource gap to be closed (i.e for there to be no need for OTDs). Secondly, if a gap is present, is the next reasonable objective to have locally trained doctors spread evenly across rural and urban settings? More simply, should Australia be aiming to produce more
doctors altogether, or should it be focused on attracting and retaining locally-trained doctors in rural areas? The answers to these two questions need to be explicitly stated at the outset, so that the reader can appropriately frame the discussion in this paragraph.

Page 13. Line 4. This statement about the impact of mandatory rural practice for OTDs is an important issue that needs to expanded on. There are important ethical concerns about a system which imposes these requirements on OTDs, especially when there is evidence that doing so is detrimental to their well-being (mental health and levels of job satisfaction, as rightly mentioned in the manuscript). Some mention should also be made about the potential for bilateral and multi-lateral agreements between professional bodies, nations, and regions regarding OTDs, with respect to both training and practice.

Conclusion

The conclusion is generally well-written, and captures the salient issues adequately.

Page 13. Line 56. "This report draws on evidence identifies patterns of work by overseas- and locally-trained doctors in Australia" should read, "This report draws on evidence which identifies patterns of work by overseas- and locally-trained doctors in Australia".

Level of interest

Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English

Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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