Reviewer's report

Title: The Use of Standardized Patients for Mock Oral Board Exams in Neurology: A Pilot Study

Version: 1 Date: 13 December 2005

Reviewer: Brian Mavis

Reviewer's report:

General

This manuscript documents the development and implementation of a standardized patient-based practice oral exam for neurology residents. The authors provide significant details about the cases and checklists developed for the practice exam. Unfortunately, the results as reported are limited because of the small sample size of participants in the pilot test. The meaningfulness of the results presented as means and SDs is questionable because of the small sample size.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Overall, this paper is not suitable as a research study. While the literature review provides many citations to published work, there is no synthesis of the published literature to provide a context of why the current study is important or specific issues related to oral examinations that would need to be considered in this paper. In addition, there is no clear research question or hypothesis provided to frame this investigation. Further, the authors fail to address many issues related to oral exams such as case specificity and examiner variability. They do suggest on page 10 that the fidelity of the SP over time is a concern, however they provide no evidence from the literature review to support this as a concern.

The work of Hodgins and colleagues might prove useful in framing possible research questions: An objective structured clinical examination for evaluating psychiatry clinical clerks (Academic Medicine, 1997) and Validation of an objective structured clinical exam in psychiatry, (Academic Medicine in 1998).

Another source that might be helpful is Kumar et al, Locating, characterizing and minimizing sources of error for a paper case-based structured oral examination in a multi-campus clerkship. (Advances in Health Science Education, 2001).

The authors suggest that the use of standardized patients in neurology oral practice exams is a novel application, and this is indeed the strength of their paper. This paper would be stronger if it was rewritten in the form of an educational innovation rather than a research report. The focus would be on the issues that this innovation in assessment would address. The appendices provide valuable detail about the development and implementation of this innovation. In addition, the faculty and resident questionnaires can be reported as preliminary evaluation data about the innovation. The literature review would need to provide a context for the problems this innovation is designed to address.

Other concerns related to this manuscript as it was submitted for review:

(a) There is no evidence of IRB approval for this study, or that it was submitted for IRB approval.
(b) The authors should clarify in the text if this practice oral examination was implemented as a formative or summative assessment for the residents.

(c) In the Results section, the authors report the use of inter-observer agreement; the use of Cohen’s Kappa coefficient should also be presented. (Cohen, J. A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. Educational and Psychological Measurement. 1960; 20(1): 37-46. see also Landis, J.R. & Koch, G.G. The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. Biometrics. 1977; 33: 159-174.)

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

none

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

none

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests