

Medical students' response to request for identifiers on a research questionnaire

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We came across an interesting finding in a recent study amongst third year medical students at the National University of Singapore. The study which had ethical approval, was to determine medical students' attitudes to psychiatry and mental illness. It involved completing 2 self-reported questionnaires, the ATP-30 (the Attitudes Toward Psychiatry – 30 items) and the AMI (Attitudes towards Mental Illness) at the start and at the end of a 4 week psychiatry posting.

Students were allowed to use their own identifiers if they did not wish to use their university matriculation numbers on the questionnaire. The identifiers were needed for the pre- and post- comparison analysis. The exercise turned out to be interesting and amusing given the wide selection of identifiers used. Forty-two percent chose not to use their matriculation numbers. Instead they used a wide variety of words, numbers and drawings as identifiers. These ranged from the identifiers such as 'Britney Rocks', 'coffee drinker', 'Gladiator' to a name followed by the phrase 'This is not my name'. Prosaic ones such as '12345' and 'xyz' surprisingly proved to be one of a kind identifiers. Equally in keeping with their medical studies, there was an identifier which had a drawing of the 'pqrs' interval of the ECG and another of a heart. Other interesting ones included small drawings of a crocodile, one of a fish with a fishing line dangling in front of it and another of a waxing and waning series of moons.

Every one of the 42 (of 100 respondents) had different identifiers which not only proved their ingenuity and uniqueness but raised the possibility that self-selected identifiers could work for selected study populations.

The major concerns in using students as research participants includes, among other issues, coercion and confidentiality from the standpoint of ethical standards and regulatory compliance (Tickle & Heatherton, 2006). Forester *et al* in a study on medical students perceptions of medical education research and their roles as participants found that 89% were not concerned with their confidentiality as study participants (Forester & McWhorter, 2005). Our incidental finding was otherwise – they were reluctant to use their matriculation number and could be inventive with regards to maintaining confidentiality.

References

Forester, J.P. & McWhorter, D.L. (2005) Medical Students' perceptions of medical education research and their roles as participants, *Academic Medicine*, 80(8), pp. 780-785.

Tickle, J.J. & Heatherton, T.F. (2006) Research Involving College Students, In: R.J. Amdur, E.A. Bankert (Eds) *Institutional Review Board Management and Function*, (Canada, Jones and Bartlett Publishers Inc), Ch 9.

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