Constructive criticism or popularity contest: what medical students think of peer assessing professionalism
Jayne Garner, Dr Helen O’Sullivan, Dr Reverend David Taylor, and the Northern PPD Group
Contact: Jayne Garner, CETL, Cedar House, Ashton Street, Liverpool, L69 3GE. Email jayneg@liv.ac.uk

Background
The GMC (2007) has recently emphasised the importance of professional behaviours in medical students. Effective ways to assess professional behaviours have been debated in medical education over the past decade (Stern, 2006). Peer assessment of professionalism has emerged as a successful way for medical students to enhance their performance (Schonrock-Adema, 2007). However, little research has been done on student attitudes to peer assessment of professionalism in the UK.

Aims and methods
A voluntary anonymous online survey was circulated to medical students at six medical schools in the North of England. The survey asked students about their experience of giving and receiving feedback, their attitudes to using peer assessment and how comfortable they would feel doing this. A 5 point Likert scale was developed for use as a measure in the survey.

Results
500 students responded to the survey (a response rate of 11% overall). 26% of respondents had not received peer feedback previously. More respondents said they would feel guilty about reporting negative professional behaviours of a friend (66%) than a peer (48%).

The majority of respondents felt that peer assessment could help them reflect on their professional behaviours (78%). 61% of respondents said they would feel comfortable assessing their peers and 76% of respondents would feel comfortable receiving feedback on their professional behaviours from their peers.

Respondents felt more uncomfortable assessing issues relating to self management than they did assessing group work or communication skills.

Conclusions
Respondents did have concerns about how peer assessment could be influenced by personal relationships, how the information from peers would be used (formatively or summatively), what training would be available to students and the impact peer assessment would have upon student friendships and relationships. Overall respondents were positive about assessing their peers professional behaviours, and how this could help them reflect upon and improve their own practice. This pilot study will be used to inform a large scale national study of peer review and professional behaviours scheduled to take place during 2008-9.

References
General Medical Council and the Medical Skills Council, 2007, Medical Students: professional behaviour and fitness to practice