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What You Don't Know Can Hurt You: Communicating Health Law with Vermont Physicians

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What You Don't Know Can Hurt You: Communicating Health Law with Vermont Physicians

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Background

Physicians today need a working knowledge of pertinent medical law. With an increased focus on patients' rights in health care, states are encouraged to set specific laws protecting patients. The additional medical legislation places a challenge on physicians to continually update their medical-legal acumen such as disease reporting, malpractice issues, and medical information access.

Little research has been conducted on physicians' knowledge of the law and medicine. In an effort to expand upon these topics and to find an efficient way to make information about the law and medicine accessible to Vermont physicians, the University of Vermont College of Medicine partnered with the Vermont Board of Medical Practice to answer the following questions:

- How well do Vermont physicians understand laws that relate to the practice of medicine?
- How do Vermont physicians access information on law and medicine?
- What topics are most relevant and important to Vermont physicians?
- What educational methods will be effective and how can the Vermont Board of Medical Practice best serve such education needs?

Methods

Survey: Using a combination of multiple-choice, likert-type scales and fill in the blank response items, we developed a twenty question survey that gathered a variety of information including demographics, current knowledge of medical-legal issues, preferred resources for answering medical-legal questions, and preferences for furthering their medical-legal knowledge. The survey was posted in a secure, online survey service, Survey Monkey®.

Participants: An email request to participate in the study was sent to 1259 email addresses of Vermont Licensed Physicians, supplied by the Vermont Board of Medical Practice. Some email represented group physicians. The email invited the physicians to participate in an IRB-approved study about medicine and the law. The physicians were assured that no personal identification was collected. An electronic link to the secure, online survey was provided. The survey remained open for 27 days and one follow-up email was sent midway through the time-period.

This study was reviewed and accepted by the University of Vermont's Institutional Review Board.

For more information contact: Jan Carney MD at jan.carney@uvm.edu

This study was supported by the University of Vermont College of Medicine

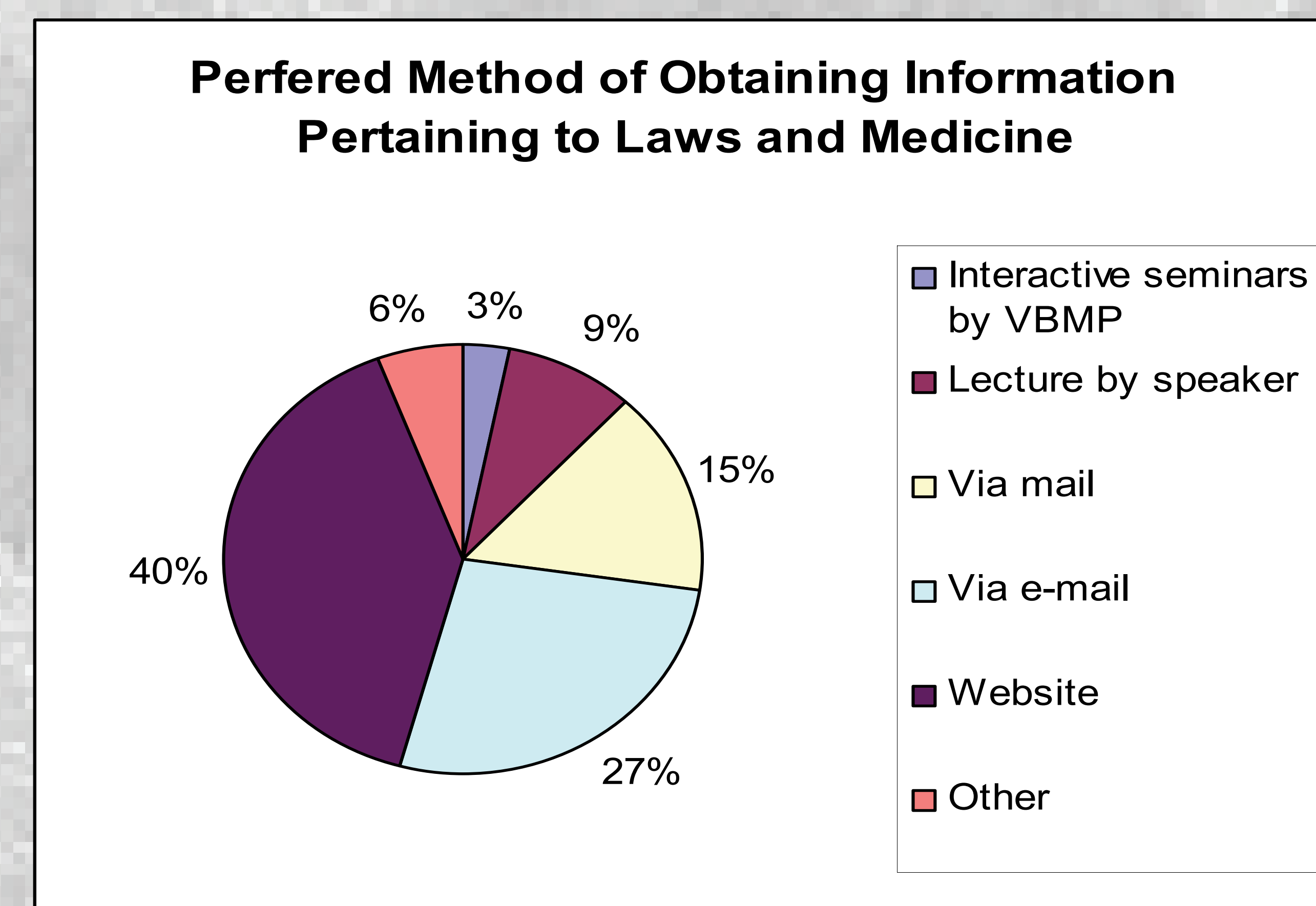
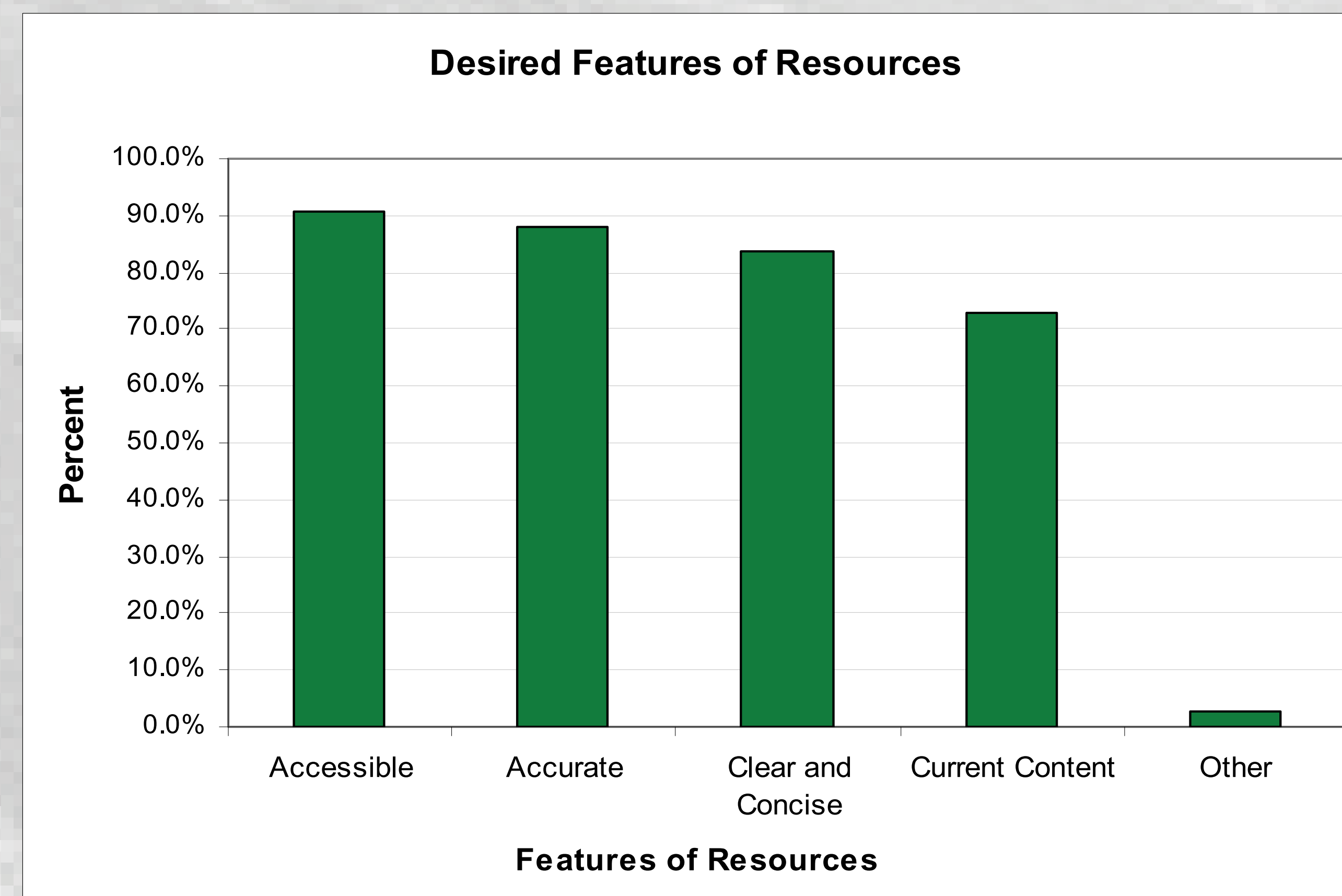
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1. UVM College of Medicine
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Results

Physician Knowledge of Laws Pertaining to Medicine:

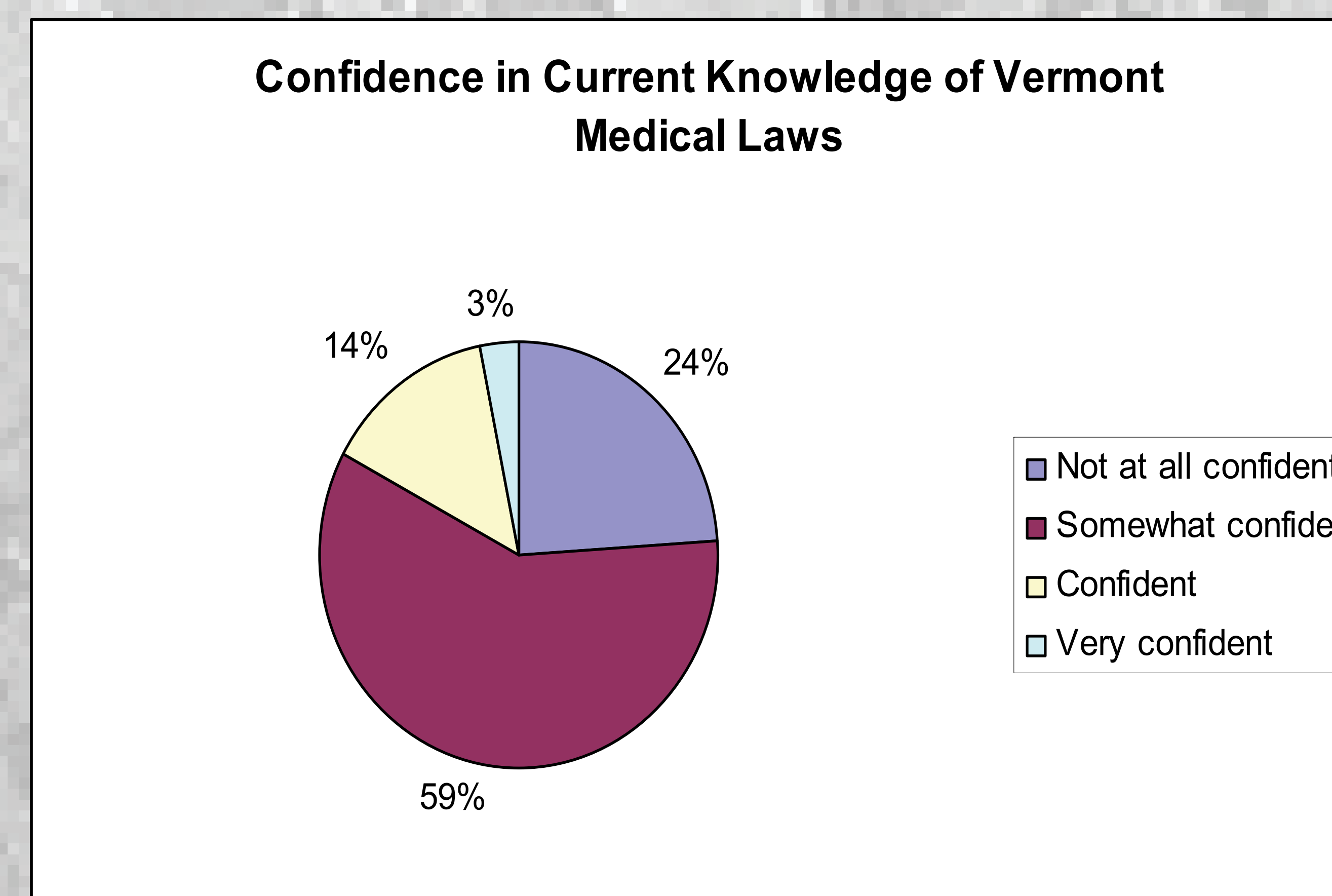
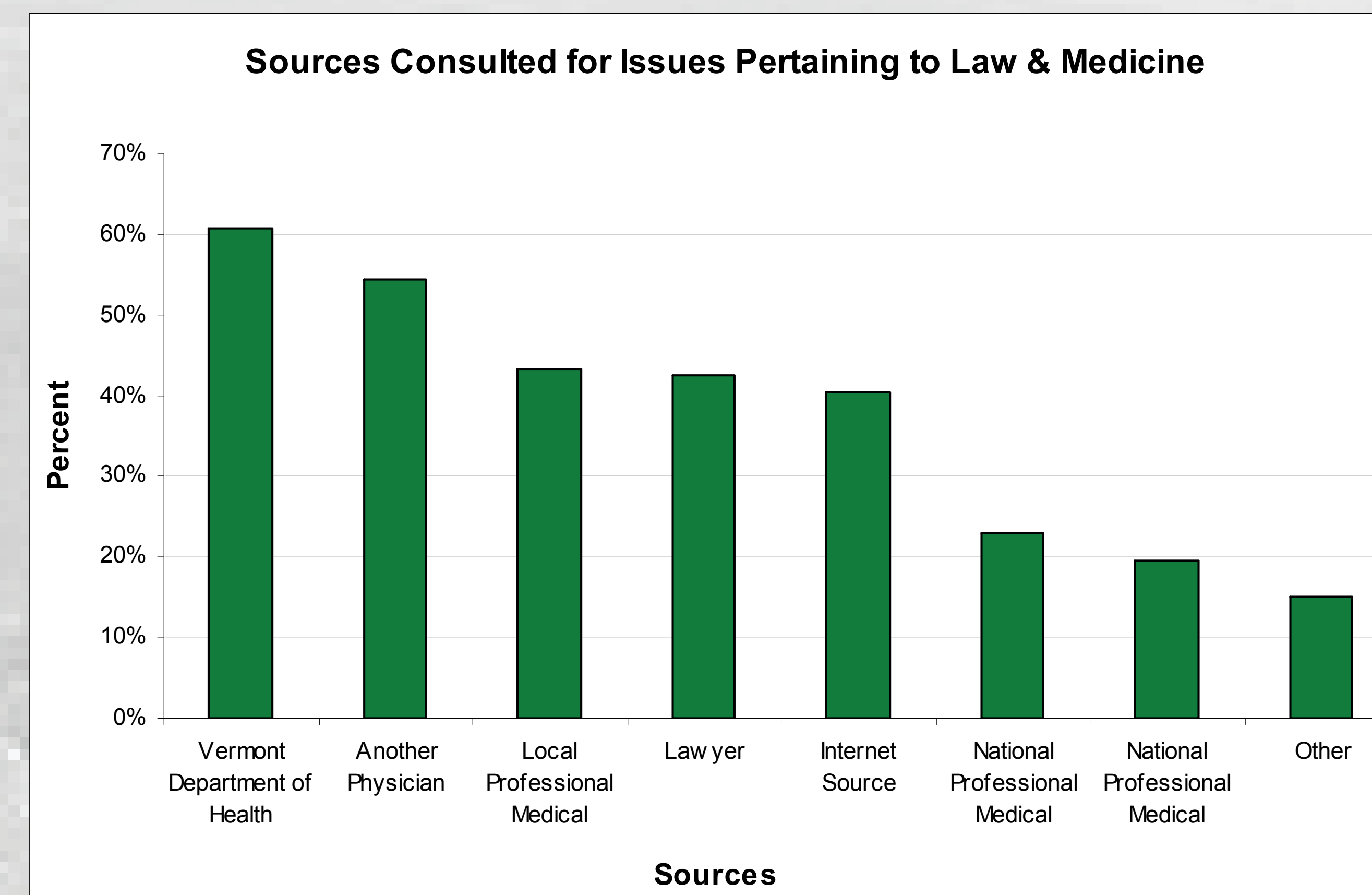
- 275 surveys were completed (22% response rate)
- 89.4% of physicians rated their education during medical school and residency of medical-legal issues as poor or okay.
- 37.1% of physicians felt confident or very confident in their ability to find information pertaining to laws and medicine
- When questioned "If a physician holds a medical license in more than one state, is he or she required to report punitive actions committed in other states?," 83.6% answered correctly.
- From a list of possible illegal narcotic prescribing actions, 59.6% identified the illegal behavior.
- When asked to identify which communicable disease required immediate reporting within 24 to the state department of health, 59.3% responded correctly while 10.5% responded incorrectly and 30.2% of physicians were not sure.



- Only 90 respondents (32.7%) correctly answered all 3 knowledge questions.
- There was an association between physicians who were more confident in their knowledge of medical law and those who were more confident in their ability to find information pertaining to legal issues (P<0.001).
- A lack of confidence in legal knowledge was not associated with incorrect answers on knowledge questions. Primary Care Physicians were more likely than specialists to correctly answer questions pertaining to narcotics prescriptions (P<0.0001) and reportable diseases (P<0.0001).

Board of Health Responses:

- For information about issues pertaining to law and medicine, 60.8% reported that the Vermont Board of Medical Practice website is among the sources that they consult.
- 88.6% of physicians report being interested in obtaining more information pertaining to laws and medicine.



Discussion

Demographics:

Our sample was similar in age gender and distribution of Vermont Physicians as assessed in the Vermont Department of Health Statistical Report of 2006. [Vt Department of Health]

Physician Knowledge of Laws Pertaining to Medicine:

- Physicians clearly indicated that their education failed to provide them with adequate knowledge of medical laws. This has implications for adjustments in medical education.
- Physicians are not currently confident in their knowledge of legal issues pertaining to medicine, however they do report greater confidence in their ability to access information. This suggests that physicians are prepared and willing to research medical-legal questions and supports the need for accessible and high quality sources.
- Physicians are more likely to be knowledgeable of legal information related to their practice. This suggests that information should be targeted to different practice types.

Recommendations

- Physicians are interested in information provided by a reputable source, such as the Vermont Department of Health Board of Medical Practice.
- Physicians preferred local sources for information pertaining to law and medicine and that the sources be accessible, accurate, concise, and current.
- Physicians reported they preferred to obtain information via a website; however, most respondents had never visited the two most prominent Vermont internet sites related to medical law. This provides an opportunity to increase education with more communication about these resources.
- Topics physician were most interested in learning more about included: administrative, regulatory and reporting requirements.

Study Limitations

- A potential sample bias was the requisite that physicians have an active email address at the Vermont Department of Health.
- The knowledge questions assessed three different areas of medical legal knowledge.

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