Reviewer's report

Title: Effects of Self-Management Intervention on Health Outcomes of Patients with Heart Failure: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials

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Reviewer: Jonathan Mant

Reviewer's report:

The key criticism is that the authors have ‘retrospectively changed the selection criteria’. I think the authors’ response is fair – i.e. that they have clarified the inclusion criteria, rather than re-writing them. And they did review the telemonitoring studies, and did decide one was eligible.

However, I think the referee does highlight a problem – “it is artificial to separate the advice that a patient receives .. from those who deliver the information”. The general problem which both referees highlighted is the difficulty of defining what is meant by a self-management study, especially when none of the trials that were included described what they were testing as a uniquely self management intervention.

It is a pretty subjective process deciding which studies would fit into their definition, but to be fair, the design involved the use of three reviewers independently assessing whether a study was eligible or not. Given the difficulties, it might be useful for the authors to report the agreement (descriptively as much as statistically). If agreement was good, this would imply that they had managed to distil a particular characteristic out of the trials.

It is slightly confusing, in that they excluded educational interventions, yet all the trials essentially seemed to involve educational components. As I see it, the study is a review of studies that included a self management component, yet none of the interventions were exclusively self management. Therefore, it is difficult to know how much of the effect was due to self management, and how much to contact with the health care professional or the education etc etc. Therefore, I think the conclusion (that a self management programme decreases readmissions) is overstated.

Given the potential overlap with the telemonitoring, maybe it would be judicious to refer to the telemonitoring review that they refer to in their response to the referee in their discussion.

Conclusion:

I don’t think there are any major methodological defects that would prevent publication, but I would recommend that the authors make minor modifications by:

1. describing the agreement as to eligibility of the studies of the independent assessors

2. Acknowledging in the discussion the difficulty of knowing to what extent self management as opposed to other aspects of the intervention was responsible for the effect, and toning down the conclusion accordingly.

3. Include in the discussion other relevant reviews (such as telemonitoring)