Reviewer's report

Title: Methodological criteria for the assessment of moderators in systematic reviews of Randomised Controlled Trials: a consensus study

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Reviewer: Patriek Mistiaen

Reviewer's report:

This is an excellent research paper on a relevant matter. The aim of the paper is to start a discussion about the methodology on subgroup-analysis for moderator effects in systematic reviews. This paper gives a very good basis for this discussion and should be published without further delay.

The authors followed a well conceived plan to come to an initial set of criteria and to obtain comments from experts in the field. The obtained and discussed final set of criteria is now ready for further discussion and needs hereto the publication of the paper.

I will not go into the content of the criteria, since many experts have already done so.

Discretionary revisions:

Only two minor points I like to make that authors may consider perhaps in the discussion section and/or in future research:

1. I understand the problem the authors faced in searching relevant papers for inclusion in the traditional databases. They solved the problem adequately. However, these searches could be complemented by forward citation searches in the Web of Science by using the already included papers to find other papers that referred to these.

2. The authors suggest that the list of criteria they developed, may now be improved and ameliorated by further discussion between experts. I agree with that, but I think that the criteria also have to be tested empirically. This could be done in my opinion by comparing results of moderator subgroup analysis based on published effect sizes following the criteria to results of moderator subgroup analysis obtained through individual patient data meta-analysis of the same papers. I recognize this is a lot of work, but I think it is worth to mention this way of further research in the discussion part of the paper

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a
statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests