Author's response to reviews

Title: A worked example of "best fit" framework synthesis: A systematic review of views concerning the taking of potential chemopreventive agents

Authors:

Christopher Carroll (c.carroll@shef.ac.uk)
Andrew Booth (a.booth@shef.ac.uk)
Katy Cooper (k.l.cooper@shef.ac.uk)

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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Dear Editors,

Please find enclosed our responses to the reviewers’ comments on our paper: A worked example of “best fit” framework synthesis: A systematic review of views concerning the taking of potential chemopreventive agents

We would like to begin by thanking the reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Reviewer 1:

Minor essential revisions:

References 11, 15 and 33 “fixed”

Discretionary revisions:

1. Text added p.5.
2. Text added p.6 to clarify the approach taken.
3. The approach was determined both by time and the need for a procedure to verify or challenge a single reviewer’s categorisation of the data. Text has been added to clarify this (p.7)
4. As Reviewer 2 below: text added, and tool placed in Appendix.
5. Time constraints do not permit such re-assessment, although we feel that the existing “gap analysis”, i.e. the description of how the original model differed from the final model, with the addition of new themes, generated from the data (pp.10-12), does go some way to answering this query. Regarding the relationships between the data and their resulting themes: these were generated in part from the relationships in the pre-existing conceptual model, and in part from the primary reviewers’ interpretation of the data. We have revised
Figure 1 (the representation of the pre-existing model), to reflect the need, decision-making and use relationships more explicitly, and to explain the development of the new model more explicitly. (p.7-8).

6. Some limitations have now been included (pp.17-18).

7. We have added text on both the identification and selection of the best fit model on p.15.

8. We have qualified this on p.14 by stating that it is the identification of the a priori framework that is more rapid, compared to other types of framework synthesis, and the coding is more rapid than grounded-theory based approaches.

9. Elaboration on potential advantages of best fit approach in theme identification: We have expanded this description and identified more explicitly how this effect may have been achieved among members of the review team (p.14).

10. This is correct – the appropriateness of an apparently “appropriate” framework may only be apparent during and post-synthesis! This has been added to the Limitations.

11. A sensitivity analysis could have been included as a feature of the proposed methodology, but was not considered necessary in this case. Explanatory text has been added (pp.9, 10)

**Reviewer 2**

**Minor essential revisions:**

“One issue is the resultant model ...”: We have considered the implications of this comment in detail but have decided not to make any revisions for two reasons. Firstly, we appreciate the possible lack of clarity and ambiguity here in terms of the physical properties component of the model. The manner in which this component differs from “side-effects” is not discussed this paper but relates to perceived and real consequences of taking an agent (side-effects), and possible problems in taking it (administration, eg. through their physical properties). We have not revised the text to explain this as the focus of this paper is the
application and evaluation of the synthesis method, rather than the resulting model itself. The topic findings of the synthesis are published in detail elsewhere (Cooper et al 2010).

Secondly, we feel that we have already accurately represented that the relationships between the components, as correctly highlighted by the reviewer, are complex and possibly recursive. This is acknowledged by the arrows in the model which indicate how risk, benefit and risk/benefit balance feed back and forth into both decision-making and use. We have therefore chosen not to address this particular point in our revisions.

**Discretionary revisions:**

“The issue of speed …”: Some instances of the word “rapid” have been removed, as we agree this was overemphasised! Referee 2 is correct in that an extant systematic review project that is separately conceived, specified and commissioned should not make concessions with regard to either speed or quality. However, we feel that producing such reviews within the specific context of Health Technology Assessments, where assessments are necessarily conducted with a 6-month or, at most, a one-year span, and involve reviews of effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, mathematical modelling, and, in some cases, a qualitative evidence synthesis element, does present widely acknowledged challenges regarding timeliness and the availability of members of research teams. We have added a comment to that effect (p.13-14). We have also included a comment on the viability of this approach as dependent on the availability of a possible model. This is presented in the new Limitations section at the end of the paper. We feel that these constraints of time and the availability of a suitable model are fundamental to the idea of a “best fit” model.

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1 See, for example, Rotstein D, Laupacis A. Differences between systematic reviews and health technology assessments: a trade-off between the ideals of scientific rigor and the realities of policy making. *Int J Technol Assess Health Care.* 2004; 20:177-183.
“Finally, the discussion around study quality ...”: We do state explicitly that we had focused on quality of reporting only, but we have now explained our approach more fully on pp.8-9 and have been more explicit in identifying what we are assessing.