Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 19 January 2011

Reviewer: James Thomas

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This is a useful and clearly-written paper that describes a relatively new approach to synthesising qualitative research in systematic reviews (and HTAs). While I have identified few 'essential' changes, and the paper is useful as it stands, I think it could be strengthened by addressing the points outlined below.

* Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. Some of the references need fixing. E.g. author names are truncated (11, 15, 33).

* Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1. The term ‘qualitative’ data is used on page 5 though, as reference 20 (Dixon-Woods M, Bonas S, Booth A, Jones DR, Miller T, Sutton AJ, Shaw RL, Smith JA, Young B (2006) How can systematic reviews incorporate qualitative research? A critical perspective. Qualitative Research. 6(1): 27-44.) observes, it’s not an uncontested area and it’s hard to agree on the application of ‘qualitative’ even in small teams. Was this a problem in this review? Also, what was your definition? (Was it simply unstructured / textual data / methods, or did it also encompass a particular world view (or world views)?

2. “Data for analysis consisted of either verbatim quotations from study participants or findings reported by authors that were clearly supported by study data.” This is a key decision and deserves a little more justification and discussion. Was this easy to implement? (Did you always agree on whether a given statement was clearly supported?) Possibly more importantly, why were authors’ conclusions / analyses not also included? Is it possible to disentangle what participants said from authors’ interpretations, or should all data in a given publication be regarded as being an interpretation? (If so, then why not include conclusions etc.)

3. “Two of the authors (XXX) each extracted data from half of the included studies. Each reviewer then checked and examined critically the extraction and categorisation or coding of data performed by the other”. Was this a pragmatic decision driven by time (no time to do everything jointly) or a quality assurance process within the review?
4. There’s quite a lot of discussion about study quality and an argument in favour of the tool used, but I can’t see a citation for it and it’s not in the paper. Would it be possible to have a summary of the tool as an appendix (if too long to put in the paper itself)?

5. Possibly the most useful addition to the paper would be a worked example of two themes (one that was in the original framework, and one derived from the studies), that shows how they originated and how they relate to the text within the studies. You also discuss how the themes relate to one another; how were these relationships ‘discovered’ within the text of the studies, and how did you record these relationships during the analysis?

6. “it does not require such extensive literature review, consultations or topic expertise to develop an a priori framework before embarking on the review itself. This may be of particular value when undertaking a synthesis of qualitative evidence within the limited timeframes of a health technology assessment, for example.” These are the benefits, but are there any limitations?

7. “If a framework of related, relevant concepts already exists” Is there any additional advice you can give here? E.g. how do you find one, and how do you decide whether an existing framework is close enough?

8. “This approach is potentially more pragmatic and rapid than other forms of qualitative data synthesis”. I think this statement needs a little more explanation.

9. “The identification and use of the “best fit” model also encouraged the reviewers to resist the inclination to “slot” study findings into a generic framework, and thus perhaps to privilege context-specific insights over generic observations already present within the pre-existing model” I think this could also do with a little elaboration.

10. “In this sense the usefulness of a particular framework is not only determined by “conceptual fit” but also by pragmatic concerns of what proportion of the study data can be accommodated within it.” Presumably it’s not possible to assess this a priori, but only after you’ve gone through the synthesis process?

11. “Nineteen of the twenty included studies were of similar, generally satisfactory or good quality...” but what would you have done if you had come across some truly dreadful studies?

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.