Reviewer's report

Title: What Counts as Reliable Evidence for Public Health Policy: the Case of Circumcision for Preventing HIV Infection

Version: 1 Date: 10 December 2010

Reviewer: Rebecca Armstrong

Reviewer's report:

This paper makes an important point about the value of observational studies.

Major compulsory revisions

This is a well debated issue. In order for this paper to contribute more wholly to this debate I would recommend a more substantial review of the peer reviewed literature on this topic. This would then allow the authors to attach references to many of their claims which at this stage are unsupported - except by using these two reviews as examples.

In addition, given that the authors refer to this paper as a case study of circumcision for preventing HIV it would be useful to outline whether other reviews have been conducted to ensure that there are not additional issues to be discussed and additional reviews to be critiqued.

Whilst the Cochrane Collaboration does have a strong focus on RCTs there are many reviews that consider other study designs. I feel that this should be acknowledged in order to provide a balanced assessment.

The issue of ethics is interesting. There is additional literature on this topic e.g Rosen (2006) has written an interesting paper defending RCTs in complex environments. I am not sure that the last sentence on page 15 captures the issues accurately - perhaps the authors views need to be more clearly articulated.

Minor essential revisions

* additional references needed throughout to substantiate points
* Page 4 second last sentence - recognise

page 5 para 2 should read: The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network dedicated to providing high quality systematic reviews of health care interventions.

* page 6 para 2 - do you know this??
* page 13 para 2 - demonstrates
* define observational studies

Discretionary revisions
The background section presents some of the debates of the broader issues associated with SRs but the argument needs to be more carefully constructed. The reader begins to feel as though RCTs are the only appropriate method. Many of the statements here need to be supported by the literature.

Have the authors considered contacting the authors of the most recent Cochrane Review? It may be worth discussing some of the claims made in this paper to seek clarification. For example the Review Group may have suggested to them that only trials be included. There is a criticisms and complaints function on the cochrane library which the authors may consider using.

There could also be some acknowledgement that Cochrane does not see that systematic reviews are the ONLY source of evidence to inform decision-making. Their reviews try to present the highest quality of evidence to inform debates. The argument about including observational studies is fair - but should be considered in this context and the context of the literature discussing this issue.

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

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

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I work for the Cochrane Public Health Review Group. This paper provides some criticism of the organisation I more broadly work within and so may impact on my conclusions. However, i feel my views outlined above are balanced.