Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 2 Date: 1 February 2011

Reviewer: Susan L Norris

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Major compulsory

1. Page 5, ‘by observational studies we mean studies that do not assign interventions by some random mechanism.” This is not a typical definition of observational studies: “observational” means that the investigator did not assign exposure at all. There are non-randomized trials where the investigator assigns exposure (ie NOT observational) which are not RCTs; these are often called “controlled clinical trials”. CCTs are not observational.

2. Page 6: ‘data from observational studies (OS) therefore need to be included when doing SRs of available evidence”. I disagree strongly. OS should be considered for inclusion in any review, but OS may not be suitable for some review questions. RCTs may answer a review question in all the relevant aspects (PICOS), high quality, applicability to the population/setting of interest.

Minor essential revisions

3. Page 8, first paragraph: still need some past tense: “replaced”, “assumed”, “therefore did not refer to them”.

4. Page 9: redundant discussion of the cointervention of behavioral counseling. This could be made more succinct.

5. Page 13: “relevantly” is not a word to my knowledge. How about “is relevant and similar to…”

6. Page 19: “despite general methodological advantages in detecting causality…”. Is causality detected, or is it determined? The latter seems preferable to me.

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.