Reviewer's report

Title: The selection of search sources influences the findings of a systematic review of people’s views: a case study in public health

Version: 1 Date: 3 October 2011

Reviewer: Patricia Lucas

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting paper, and will be useful to future reviewers in the field. I have some recommendations which authors may like to consider in revising this paper.

Major Compulsory Revisions

There are a number of structural changes which should be made to this paper to emphasise this methodological study as distinct from the methods and results of the review itself.

1. A clear statement of the aims of this paper is needed. At the moment its not clear if the main aim is to assess impact on the utility or the findings. I would find a focus on the latter alone difficult to justify – there is always the possibility of a paper with substantially different findings existing but reasonable limits on searching must be drawn.

2. The authors have drawn a distinction between those sources identified in the protocol and those added after review by one member of their advisory group. The distinction drawn at the moment depends on the behaviour and decisions of this review group, rather than the features of the sources themselves. I think a stronger division would be between those identified in multiple sources and those retrieved from only one. Or, a distinction could be drawn between different kinds of sources (corporate and/or profit making vs research or professional bodies?).

3. With this in mind, and assuming utility of search strategy is key a stronger narrative is needed to justify and explain the methods selected to assess this. The current methods section is not complete in this respect. It would help the reader if there was a clear list of what aspects of utility and impact authors have chosen to examine and how these will be tested.

4. More detail is needed about the searches undertaken. The authors cross refer to the published review, but I don’t believe this is sufficient in this case because this paper is about the methods of searching. Regardless of databases used, relevant studies will not be retrieved from bibliographic database if the search terms are not well constructed. Example search terms should therefore be included, and exact search strategies could be provided in a supplementary file.

5. In a few places methodological details about the systematic review are included which aren’t needed and should be removed (eg description of approach to analysis) to avoid confusion.
6. For the reasons given above and because one it more used to reading the ‘big picture’ before the detail, I would recommend moving the section on ‘utility of different searches’ to the beginning of the results section.

7. I would recommend Table 3 include number of records selected for full screen. Limiting to only those were finally included is a partial picture, it would be useful to know how many studies that were similar but not, ultimately, includable were found from each search.

8. I didn’t find Table 1 particularly helpful. Table 3 reports inclusion by source. Building on point 2 above I think the other table needed is a definitive list of studies showing all the places they were found through. This would then be the place where duplication between sources was identified, so that readers could easily see which sources provided unique references.

9. The limitations of this study should be set out in the discussion. Among these I would include the particular limits of this review (only UK studies were included which probably changes the relevance of some sources). Also, the costs (in time and access rights) of additional searches and screening should be commented on.

Minor Essential Revisions

10. Table 3 should provide full name and discipline for all databases, rather than short versions or acronyms either. On p.16 authors state “In the studies were from different subject disciplines” those who don’t already the databases named need this additional detail o support this statement.

Discretionary Revisions

11. I would find it useful if the authors used or discussed the terms specificity and sensitivity or precision and completeness which a reader might expect to be discussed in this paper. The term precision is used, but not completeness. There may be reasons why both these wordings were rejected, in which case I would like to know what these are.

12. A possible additional discussion point : The implications of this review are likely of interest for those seeking to conduct a systematic review in any field not well served by high-quality bibliographic databases regardless of the type of study sought.

13. I’m not sure I agree that authors have demonstrated bias, since this assumes that missingness is not random. Authors have identified missing studies that contributed to the findings, but not a bias in the studies retrieved. To demonstrate this there would need to be an examination of some source of bias in studies retrieved from different sources. Perhaps better to simply state that source selection could bias findings?

**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