Reviewer's report

Title: Reference Management Software in the Preparation of Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses: an exploration of usage and usability

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Reviewer: Vittoria Lutje

Reviewer's report:

General Comments:

In this manuscript, Drs. Lorenzetti and Ghali analyse the use of various types of reference management software in the preparation of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. For their study, they selected systematic reviews and meta-analyses published in the ACP journal Club between 2008-2011, analysed the reporting of use of reference management software in the articles, and prepared an author’s survey to assess the use and functionality of the software.

1) The survey had a good response rate from authors and results indicate that, although the majority (79.5%) of authors had used a reference manager software in preparing their review, only 4.8% had reported this information in the final review (in comparison with 76.9% of authors reporting on the use of statistical software). The manuscript also reports on the survey’s responders’ preferred software (Endnote), and on other comments on the usability of the various software. This last part of the results (users' preferences) appears somehow unrelated to the main research question, i.e. to determine the use and its reporting of bibliographic management software. There is no apparent link between the type of software used, reasons for switching or its perceived difficulty of use, and the fact that reviews' authors are not reporting using bibliographic software.

2) Another point to make is that more and more systematic reviews, especially complex ones with large numbers of references, are using types of software (EPPI reviewer, EROS) that combine reference management with study assessment for inclusion/exclusion and its reporting, and statistical analysis capacity. Also, web-based, open-source software such as Mendeley is becoming widely used.

3) The study suffers from some limitations and the authors appear well aware of them, mainly that the systematic reviews included in the analysis were only in the field of clinical medicine, and other disciplines such as social sciences could have given different results, and that there is no evidence to suggest that using reference management software has an impact on the quality of a systematic review. Also, there are no recognized difference between using, say, Reference Manager, Endnote or Procite.

Major Compulsory Revisions
I would like to see the study expanded to include a more complete analysis of systematic reviews in other disciplines and a more extensive list of software.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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.