Reviewer's report

Title: Cluster randomised trials in the medical literature

Version: 1 Date: 23 June 2004

Reviewer: Judy M Simpson

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an interesting and original article documenting the growth of reporting of cluster randomised trials in the medical literature. It demonstrates both the usefulness and the deficiencies of automated search strategies by showing that the strategy used here identified the exponential growth in such reporting, but also failed to detect 13 of the 18 (72%) articles on cluster randomised trials in the BMJ which the author found by hand searching.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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. First paragraph of Methods (page 5): 'artical'
2. Page 8: line 3 of 2nd paragraph: 'that' should be 'than'
3. Page 9: first sentence of first whole paragraph does not make sense, and should probably read: 'The trials in which I regarded ignoring the clustering as important were as follows.'
4. Page 11: 'others aspects'
5. Page 12: 'authorhas'
6. Table 2: the title should specify that this was a hand search; also the heading of column 5 would be better as 'Ignoring clustering judged important' without the '?' which is confusing, given the footnote

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. Towards the end of the Background (bottom of page 4), the author admits to having ignored clustering in the analysis of clustered designs. I think this should be qualified, e.g. 'when I was young and ignorant', lest readers think he is condoning this practice under some (unspecified) circumstances.

2. One of the main reasons for the dramatic increase found by the Web of Science search is likely to be simply increased acceptance and adoption of the term 'cluster randomised', which apparently originated with Donner. There is implicit recognition of this, e.g. reference to 'older terminology', but it would be better to make it explicit. It seems, in fact, that Murray and colleagues are sticking with 'group-randomized' (see reference 13) against this trend. It would be interesting to know whether this reflects different jargon being adopted in the educational and medical fields.

3. In the Discussion Bland comments on the improvement in the analysis of cluster randomised trials published in the BMJ, and refers to their series of articles on the correct analysis and reporting of such trials, and to the 'relatively high methodological standard' of the BMJ. There is no explicit mention here of peer review, and I think it would be helpful to have a description of that journal's policy with respect to statistical review of articles.
What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None