Reviewer's report

Title: A simplified search strategy for identifying randomised controlled trials for systematic reviews of health care interventions: a comparison with more exhaustive strategies.

Version: 1 Date: 12 March 2005

Reviewer: Steve McDonald

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper is a useful and timely addition to the current debate surrounding how extensively systematic reviewers need to search for trials in light of the existence of CENTRAL and better database indexing. The attempt to quantify the effect of excluding trials that are missed by a briefer search strategy adds to the paper's usefulness and relevance.

One concern is that the authors potentially overstate the impact of the CONSORT statement and without presenting sufficient data to substantiate their claims in this regard.

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

See comments relating to CONSORT below.

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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. Abstract - 2nd line of background: suggest omit 'randomized' since there are many controlled, but not necessarily, randomised trials in CENTRAL.

2. Background - 2nd para: MEDLINE has been systematically searched using the 'first two phases of a three phase highly sensitive search strategy'. The third phase has not been run systematically across all years.

3. Consistency in use of EMBASE or Embase

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Results: where it states that 'in five out of the 10 reviews the missing trials made no significant difference', the authors might want to elaborate by referring back to their a to d system in the methods. Even though there were no changes in significance, presumably there were differences in the effect sizes and/or confidence intervals.

2. Results: instead of 'Two impacts of missing data were found' suggest 'two consequences...'

3. Results: in the paragraphs on CONSORT and change over time the authors should clarify the sampling frame used. Are the results based on the 677 journal articles indexed in CENTRAL?
4. Citing CONSORT as one of the reasons why exhaustive strategies are no longer necessary is potentially misleading. Only a small proportion of the journals publishing the RCTs included in the sample are likely to be CONSORT journals, thus the adoption of CONSORT per se is not actually being compared.

Even taking account of the above comments, it's debatable whether CONSORT can be credited with the improvement shown in the proportion of RCTs with random$ in the title or abstract. The trend has been for a steady improvement going back to the early 1980s, and the authors should allude to this when citing the difference made by CONSORT.

The authors are justified in claiming that the existence of CONSORT has been important in contributing to greater awareness among researchers, authors and editors of the need to improve the reporting randomised trials. However, I'm not convinced that this paper is the appropriate place to present a pre- and post-CONSORT analysis. It's a question that warrants greater scrutiny than is given here.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.