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: 15 March 2005

Reviewer: Susan Bidwell

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a well-conducted and worthwhile contribution to the field of information searching for systematic reviews. It is well written and would be easy to replicate from the authors' clear description of the methodology.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
None

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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. Change Embase to EMBASE throughout for consistency. Correct in background section paragraph 2, line 4 but not elsewhere in the article

2. Page 6 paragraph 1 second sentence should read “…number of records were found using ‘random$.af’, compared to the HSSS.

3. Page 6 Discussion section paragraph 4. Line 1. Change to “ A strength of this study is that it used Cochrane reviews….” (only one strength mentioned, and this lines up with the following paragraph which starts “ A weakness…”

4. p. 7 paragraph 1 line 2 “… a recent study …… gives general support…”

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

A: For easier readability the authors are asked to consider the following changes to the language:

5. Methods section paragraph 4, last sentence: Consider omitting parentheses and change to “ All non-English articles were translated apart from those in Japanese and Chinese, for which resources were not available.”

6. Results section paragraph 1, second sentence. Consider omitting parentheses and change to “The remaining 21% were from the grey literature, 80% of these being conference abstracts.”

7. Discussion p. 6 paragraph 5 line 4 “regardless” Consider replacing this with “ would be identified sooner or later and therefore be included in a subsequent update of the review.”

Issues not mentioned directly by authors which would add balance if included briefly:
8. Note that 78 new reviews considered by the authors, only 57 met the inclusion criteria. As the remaining 21 reviews are a significant proportion of the total (26%), it would be interesting to know how many of those that did not meet the criteria were because they considered study designs other than the RCT alone. The fact that systematic reviews are including other study designs (see, for example, the Cochrane protocol by Petrie J et al on parenting programmes) weakens the case for the BRSS instead of exhaustive searching. I would like to see the authors qualify the last sentence ir their to include the words "When the inclusion criteria demand only RCTs, this study suggests that exhaustive searching is no longer cost effective." (or words to that effect) This is an important point as the demand for systematic reviews of non-clinical interventions is growing and the RCT design not always suitable for evaluation in these cases. It would be a pity if the conclusions of this study were applied across the board to ALL systematic reviews and pressure was put on searchers to save time/money by scaling back the search process when it is not appropriate.

9. The significance of the subject search has not been mentioned by the authors. Could they consider a brief mention of the influence that the subject search has on retrieval of studies. Their study is retrospective – i.e. it established that particular RCTs either would or would not have been located through their BRSS. They have made the assumption that the subject search itself would have been ideal. In real time searching, however, the subject search may have flaws or the indexing itself be imperfectly applied so that items will be missed. One of the major advantages of more exhaustive searching is that it approaches the topic through different indexing systems, thus leading to a greater retrieval overall than searching just the one database. A prospective study comparing the BRSS with the HSSS would be interesting. I would like to see some comment to this effect.

What next?: Accept after minor essential 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:

I declare that I have no competing interests