Reviewer's report

Title: Effectiveness of different databases in identifying studies for systematic reviews: experience from the WHO systematic review of maternal morbidity and mortality

Version: 1 Date: 31 October 2004

Reviewer: Arminee Kazanjian

Reviewer's report:

General

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

While there are several important and interesting questions regarding the effectiveness of databases for systematic review, these have not been clearly addressed in this article, indeed an important one about extended searches using other than electronic databases for research in developing countries is not even articulated. Yet it is a point made in the Conclusions. Also in the Conclusions the authors identify a need for guidelines for systematic review of observational studies. While this is a good point in general, the conclusion does not flow from the Results nor from the Discussion.

The objective of the review was to assist in mapping the burden of maternal morbidity and mortality. The article evaluates the usefulness of different data sources. Given this objective, it seems inappropriate to use the measure of precision the authors have defined. Obviously and extensive search strategy to capture the totality of burden of disease data has to be, by definition, imprecise. A study I have published recently on this subject compares sensitivity and precision of extended systematic review results of RCTs for two different subjects: cholesterol testing and acupuncture for addictions (See Savoie I, Helmer D, Green Cj, Kazanjian A, Beyond Medlice, in IJTAHC, Vol 19:1 p 168). Definitions we have used are somewhat different, and the analysis is more robust in its measures and includes statistical significance of results.

Methods of this systematic review are described only briefly, with a citation of previous publication by some of this article’s authors (and others). Results in that paper (reference # 3) indicate that RCT’s as well as observational studies were identified by the review. I am not sure why this article refers only to observational studies, but it does not add substantively to knowledge generated by the previous article.

There is no description of how the two stages of selection of eligible studies were undertaken. Was it done by a single researcher or two researchers with differences discussed and reconciles? If precision is an important factor of effectiveness of a database, then there has to be more explicit detail about inclusion/exclusion criteria.

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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)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
What next?: Reject because too small an advance to publish in any journal

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes

Declaration of competing interests:

None