Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying Systematic Reviews of the Adverse Effects of Health Care Interventions

Version: 1 Date: 22 November 2005

Reviewer: Victor Montori

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper reports on the authors’ test of search strategies for retrieving systematic reviews that had adverse effects as their primary outcome from systematic review databases (CDSR and DARE). Limited performance of these strategies allow the authors to argue for better indexing and more consistent terminology that would allow for retrieving systematic reviews that report on adverse effects.

We do not understand the relevance of searching for systematic reviews of adverse effects without a focus on a specific one. Most of our searching activity relates to identifying systematic reviews about a given intervention and its effects on a given population. We expect some of these reviews will include data on selected adverse effects. Perhaps the authors could describe the kind of user who would use a generic scanning of the literature on adverse effects. In the absence of this information, we cannot see the relevance of this contribution.

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

Assuming we may have missed the point or not understood the relevance of this contribution we propose some revisions that may enhance the clarity and message of the paper:

1. How did the authors select the search strategies tested in this study? Where they the result of empirical derivation?

2. It would help the reader to have a flow chart that would show the step-wise fashion approach used to identify the gold standard set of reviews. Were all Cochrane and CDSR reviews reviewed? If so, what methods were implemented to prevent bias in the eligibility assessments?

3. What would the authors propose was the impact on the performance of their search strategies of using adverse effects related search terms that do not cover adverse effects from non-drug interventions?

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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)

Match the objective in the abstract with that in the introduction (para 2) and place this under the Objective heading.

Under last line of the Methods section of Abstract, state the criteria for “performance” in terms of sensitivity and precision.
In Paragraph #2 under Introduction, you may want to rephrase the sentence as: “In order to test such a hypothesis, we examined two major databases of systematic reviews to test the sensitivity and precision with which systematic reviews of adverse events could be identified.”

In Paragraph #1 under Methods, we do not understand what is meant by “results from these databases would not require any assessment of study design”. Do you mean to say, that the databases were chosen because they are collection of systematic reviews and no other study design? If so, this expression is redundant.

The rationale for searching these two databases (i.e., DARE is comprehensive) is contradicted by statement in Limitations section that they are selective. Perhaps you need to specify what you mean by comprehensive and selective in both sentences?

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**What next?:** Reject because too small an advance to publish

**Level of interest:** An article of insufficient interest to warrant publication in a scientific/medical journal

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests