Reviewer’s report

Title: Optimizing Search Strategies to Identify Randomized Controlled Trials in Medline

Version: 2 Date: 5 October 2005

Reviewer: K Robinson

Reviewer’s report:

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

1. I don’t feel that the added text fully addresses the issue raised in my previous review (#5) nor is it, I think, entirely correct. It is not clear to me on what basis other studies concerning the development of optimal search strategies are dismissed as being focused on comprehensiveness alone. For instance, precision was considered in my paper referenced, including in the testing of the addition of CROSS-OVER-STUDIES. The authors provide the Lefebvre and Clarke chapter as a rationale for testing the four terms but do not address how this study fits with other work. I think there needs to be a stronger context set for this study in the introduction -- Why these four terms? Have they been tested previously (yes)? Why were other terms that have been tested not included?

2. (Last sentence) How do the limits in using precision and sensitivity influence the study results and interpretation? At the moment it seems as thought that sentence was simply dropped in to the text.

3. The conclusions may be strengthened if there was more specific discussion of the cost-benefit balance of using the suggested strategy. For instance, the conclusion in the abstract is that adding ‘versus’ is able to balance the sensitivity and precision of the two phases of the HSSS. Is it worthwhile to use the strategy that found 3 more studies? How many additional reports had to be read to identify those 3 studies? In general, I feel that the interpretation and conclusions by the authors are not supported by the results.

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. There are some issues with the text that need to be addressed. For example, page 10, sentence about work to make CENTRAL comprehensive. Also, need to add ‘the’ before HSSS in a consistent manner.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Thank you to the authors for clarifying that in the current OVID interface [tw] searches only the title and abstract information. However, [tw] is generally defined as an "alias for all fields in the database" and, in other interfaces such as PubMed, [tw] does produce this broader less precise search. There is potential for confusion, especially for those wanting to translate the authors' strategy into PubMed. As another source of confusion, the Cochrane HSSS in OVID format uses [ti,ab] not [tw] (See Appendix 1). I would suggest that the authors consider using the [ti,ab] format in their search strategy to avoid these potential areas for confusion.

2. Methods - I would suggest clarifying whether the excluded articles list that had to be included in
the systematic reviews was a listing based on all screening levels or full-text only.

3. (First paragraph, page 11) I would appreciate clarification about how or in what way this study has more practical significance for people conducting systematic reviews.

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I am an author on a study referenced in this paper.