Reviewer’s report

Title: Improving the methods used in systematic reviews of adverse effects: a proposal based on evidence from published reviews.

Version: 2 Date: 11 October 2005

Reviewer: Sheena Derry

Reviewer’s report:

General
This is an interesting and thorough review, although the findings are not unexpected to those who work in the field of adverse events and systematic review. We now know the problems and must move on to find the solutions.

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
Abstract Methods line 7. Replace ; with :
Various places. Closing bracket for reference is ), replace with ]
Reference list. Remove punctuation after journal title for refs 2, 10, 11; correct journal abbreviations for ref 6, 11

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
The authors identify searching and quality assessment as the two areas that should be prioritised for improvement, but suggestions to improve the situation and ideas for future research in the Discussion/Conclusions are a bit thin.

Two thoughts relating to searching come to my mind:

A compromise must always be made between time (and cost) and completeness. There is often an assumption that “more is better” when it comes to databases searched for a review, but what is important is the choice of databases, which should be based on knowledge of the topic areas covered by each. Many researchers are not familiar with the differing content of databases, and may rely too heavily on Medline/PubMed. Better dissemination of information about individual database content might improve choice of database to search without increasing time taken. Using information specialists may bypass this problem, in addition to helping with more effective search strategies, but not everyone has access to their expertise.

The authors identify “deficiencies” in the search strategies employed in many of the reviews they studied, but we do not know how these deficiencies affect the conclusions. Future research might redo a number of systematic reviews to determine whether yields of relevant papers are increased by (1) searching more than two or three data sources, (2) using a qualified information specialist to conduct searches, and (3) searching both text and MESH fields. If yields are increased, are the conclusions with the “deficient” search altered (how robust is the original result?), and which of the three improved methods made the most difference?
What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I have in the past worked with Yoon Loke, but have had no involvement with this paper.