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: 17 October 2005

Reviewer: Deborah Ashby

Reviewer's report:

General
This systematic review of systematic reviews of adverse effects is a competent and thorough piece of work, that sets the groundwork for methodological development that is undoubtedly needed in the area.

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)

None

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1) The review focuses on reviews which had adverse events as their primary outcome, primarily for reasons of feasibility. To what extent can the lessons here be generalized to other reviews that include adverse effects, and to what extent are further reviews likely to be necessary?

2) In the results (p6), the authors say that they were surprised that evidence hierarchies were rarely used, but in the discussion (p8) acknowledge that short-term trials in selected populations are not always the best study design for adverse events. The traditional hierarchies of evidence were really developed in the context of studies of efficacy. This all links to one of the authors conclusions about lack of tested quality assessment tools. It may be more consistent to avoid the earlier comments in the results. Also, do the authors have any sense of how these tools should be developed?

3) The title promises more than it delivers. A 'proposal' sounds like definite suggestions, whereas the paper is really more at the stage of highlighting the issues to be addressed. I would suggest modifying the title slightly in this regard.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests