Reviewer's report

Title: Increasing Recruitment to Randomised Trials: A Review of Randomised Controlled Trials

Version: 1 Date: 15 May 2006

Reviewer: Denise Kendrick

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this paper which considers the important issue of methods to improve recruitment to RCTs. I think this paper has an important message, but I have some concerns which are listed below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. It would be helpful to write this review in accordance with the QUORUM guidelines and using their headings and subheadings to structure the report

2. Introduction - it seems very strange that of the 2 reviews quoted in the penultimate paragraph one failed to find any controlled studies whilst the other found 15, when they were published within 3 years of each other. Were they actually addressing the same research question?

3. Please include details of the search strategy in the methods, including dates of searching databases, any hand searching that was done, contacting authors for unpublished data, any other websites searched, any attempts to find unpublished data. At present it is difficult to be sure that a comprehensive search was undertaken due to insufficient detail being given.

4. Please give more detail about study selection - e.g. did you screen abstracts, did both reviewers do this, what happened about disagreements/uncertainties etc

5. Data extraction - you say you extracted data on intervention and control - intervention and control what?

6. Did you do any quality assessment - if not, why not?

7. Presumably you used a fixed effects meta analysis? Which package? Looks like Revman from the forest plot (by the way its not Forrest - see results)

8. Figure 1 - the reasons for exclusion in the 1st reasons box - some appear to be the same reason e.g. discussion of strategies but not an RCT appears to be the same as not an RCT of recruitment strategies. Can some be combined? Could you just report those not meeting each of your inclusion criteria (and say whether each study had only one reason or more than 1 reason for exclusion)

9. Results paragraph 2 under trial design - the wording is ambiguous - do you mean there was not difference in recruitment rates between the randomised and patients preference arms?

10. In several places you have claimed differences in recruitment rates when these are not actually significant e.g. trained Hispanic women were not significantly more successful in recruiting than non trained Hispanic women (page 6); personalised letters were not significantly better than flyers alone (page 6); monetary incentives (page 7) did not significantly increase response rates (95% CI includes 1.00)

11. Study reference number 11 - did this study compare recruitment via a church alone against the control group? From the table it looks like the comparison was of church recruitment + mail + phone?? Please specify in the table what the combinations of approaches were for A,B and C.

12. It would be very helpful if you could include the reference numbers in the table of included studies and on the forest plot; its annoying to have to keep looking at the reference list to try and work out what study you are referring to and to see how the text, tables and charts match up

13. The forest plot needs some attention to detail - it looks like it has been copied straight out of Revman.
The Revman subtitles need removing as do the heterogeneity stats - why include these when you are not doing a meta analysis and when clearly you would not consider doing one as the interventions are so clinicaly different? You haven't done a random effects meta-analysis so why include RR(random) in the effect size column? Use full words - embaj is meaningless to readers (as is Anglo in the table).

14. Why have you expressed effect sizes for individual studies in figure 2 as RR but used OR in figure 3?

15. Table 1 - the numbers recruited (or even better the recruitment rates) would be better in the outcome column than in the participants column. Also you only need to include outcomes relevant to your review here - e.g. compliance based on pill counts is irrelevant. Why do some of the cells in the participants column include time periods but not others? Did Aaronson et al not measure recruitment rates as well - not mentioned in table but included in forest plot?

16. The discussion would be improved by stating the principal findings at the beginning and by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the review.

17. The abstract doesn't completely accurately reflect the findings - it should include the simple recruitment approaches that did increase response rates.

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