Reviewer's report

Title: Conducting a critical interpretive review of the literature on access to healthcare by vulnerable groups

Version: Date: 1 May 2006

Reviewer: Zoe Garrett

Reviewer's report:

General

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

1. It was unclear from reading the article whether the authors are proposing a new method of synthesis or if they are proposing something broader which also includes the stages preceding the synthesis (e.g. development of the review question, searching, screening, data extraction, critical appraisal). Based on information in box 2, it would seem the authors are proposing the latter, but if so further detail in the methods section around these preceding stages is necessary. For example the nature of the iterative processes, how exactly they refined traditional techniques and the use of further examples from their review of access to healthcare to show how they carried out and developed these stages. As the article stands I do not believe it would be possible for a reader to go away and consider carrying out a critical interpretive synthesis or to appreciate what the methodology really has to offer over either a conventional systematic review, an interpretive review or a traditional narrative review in terms of flexibility, rigour and fitness for purpose.

2. The article includes a significant summary of the results of the review which I feel steps over the boundary between an article where the main aim is to discuss the development of a new methodology and an article which reports the results of a review. As review articles do not appear to be accepted in this journal, I suggest altering the focus of the results and writing a fuller summary of the results as a separate review article in a different journal. The value of having the results in an article about methodological advances would seem to be to illustrate the development of the synthesis; how concepts from the individual studies were developed into concepts flowing across the studies and how the authors worked through the contradictions in the evidence to develop their argument. Rather than summarising the results of the review, as the authors appear to have done, it would seem more appropriate to provide in-depth analyses of a small number of examples thereby illustrating the development of the process of synthesis.

3. In the discussion the article states that their new methodology draws on the strengths of conventional systematic review methodology. This would benefit from further explanation as following the iterative process there did not seem to be anything left of conventional systematic review methodology, beyond the broad sequence of stages which could be argued to be common to any type of review. Later on in the discussion the authors state that CIS allows an explicit account of formulating a research question etc, which may be what the authors have in mind, however there is very little of the methods section presented explicitly in this article. The article would benefit from clarification about how exactly the processes build on conventional systematic review methodology (as the authors currently present it) and consideration of the relevance of this statement given conventional systematic review was considered inappropriate for their purposes.

4. In general the article presents a fairly narrow conceptualisation of conventional systematic review methodology, as evidenced by the references to the York CRD and the Cochrane Collaboration. While many of the statements about conventional systematic review methodology are couched in tentative language they fail to really reflect the variations and flexibility in the methodologies used outside of these institutions (for example the EPPI-Centre). This is not to say that these other methodologies would have enabled the authors to use conventional systematic review methodology, but the differences between conventional systematic review and what the authors propose may not be so large.

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. page 4: âœin turn limits the amount of evidence required to address the review questionâ€”. âœavailableâ™ may be more appropriate than âœrequiredâ™
2. page 9: âœthe robustness its theoretical baseâ€”âœofâ™ needs to be inserted
3. page 19: âœwe feel that our decision not to limit to focus of the review at the outsetâ€”âœthe focusâ™ rather than âœto focusâ™
4. page 17: âœconducting reviews interpretive reviewsâ€

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None

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

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests