Reviewer's report

Title: A rapid review of economic evaluation methods in Cochrane systematic reviews relevant to health promotion and public health

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Reviewer: James raftery

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General
Is the question new and well defined?
The aim of the article is to summarise the state of art in economic evaluation methods alongside Cochrane Collaboration systematic reviews relevant to public health and health promotion, in order to inform the development of methodological guidance for reviewers.

Comments: I struggle to understand this aim for several reasons. The meaning of “the state of art of economic evaluation methods alongside CC systematic reviews” is not clear. First, “methods” could refer to economic evaluation or to the links between economic evaluation and systematic reviews. The latter is complicated by the fact that systematic reviews use the hierarchy of evidence that prioritises RCTS, while no such hierarchy applies to economic evaluation. Unless this is confronted the finding is likely to be that the links are poor (which is what the authors find).

Second, the topic “public health and health promotion” is one in which economic evaluations are fairly rare due to the complexity of the interventions, the diffuse outcomes and particularly the long time scales involved. This means that there are likely to be relatively few economic evaluations that could be included in systematic reviews. Third, it is not clear to me what guidance such a review could suggest for reviewers, other than to do better.

Are the methods appropriate?
Comment: Given the lack of clarity of the aims, it is difficult to assess the appropriateness of the methods to the aims. As best I can judge the literature search is appropriate. However, the methodological quality of the study would be much improved if it was extended to explore the extent to which the systematic reviews missed useful economic studies. This is not done.

Are the data sound?
Comment: The data arising from the literature search are sound, as far as I can tell.

Does the manuscript adhere to standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes,

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and supported by the data?
Comments: The results and discussion/conclusion must be considered together. The results are straightforward, namely that 9 of the 21 completed reviews aimed to include economic issues, and of those only 5 explicitly searched for economic studies. However, the inclusion criteria might well have excluded studies which were to do with economics or contained economics data. Those that attempted to combine economic findings did so narratively rather than quantitatively. The authors state “four completed reviews draw attention to the ostensibly legitimate point that incorporation of formal economic methods is inappropriate due to inconclusive or methodologically weak evidence of intervention effectiveness”. Ostensibly here implies that the lack of evidence on effectiveness should not prevent incorporation of such studies. This is highly debatable, at least! I would have little interest in the economics of some public health interventions that lack evidence of effectiveness. It would be useful to know for how many of the 21 reviews the evidence for effectiveness of the intervention was considered strong.

The discussion is hampered by lack of knowledge as to whether the systematic reviews missed useful economic studies, and indeed whether such studies were possible if the effectiveness of the intervention was unclear. The discussion implies that sophisticated methods of evidence synthesis could be used to integrate the economic aspects, but this assumes the task is worth doing.
The conclusions stress better links between reviewers and economists. While this is worthy it says nothing about the different criteria and agendas pursued by each.

Doe the title and the abstract accurately convey what has been found 
Yes

Is the writing acceptable?
I struggled to read this paper which is dense and bears the fingerprints of its 8 authors. It is difficult to read, partly because its discussion and conclusions struggle to make sense of what has resulted from what I think are sub-optimal methods

Revisions
I suggest the following major revisions
a) discuss the extent to which economic analysis is useful if the intervention is not shown to be effective, 
b) state for each of the 21 selected systematic reviews the extent to which each was effective
 c) establish for those interventions that were effective, the number of economic studies that would have been picked up by good quality appropriate search strategy.
d) discuss the implications of these findings for improving the links between economic evaluation and systematic reviews.

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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