Reviewer's report

Title: Do health technology assessments comply with QUOROM diagram guidance? : an empirical study

Version: 2 Date: 23 June 2007

Reviewer: David Moher

Reviewer's report:

General
This manuscript is one of very few that has evaluated any aspect of the QUOROM Statement (i.e., checklist or flow diagram). There are many parts of the manuscript that I enjoyed reading particularly the recommendations section of the discussion which is, I believe, an important contribution to the literature.

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

I have three major points for the authors to consider in their revisions. Throughout the manuscript, and even the title, there is mention of health technology assessments (HTAs). The authors have not clearly distinguished between HTAs and systematic reviews/meta-analyses; more melding of them. Recognizing that there is substantive ambiguity in the terminology of what a systematic is there is a distinct possibility the readers will see HTAs, systematic reviews and meta-analyses as all the same and they are obviously not even if they do share some similar attributes. Some have argued that there are important differences between both (e.g., Rothstein D, and Laupacis A. Differences between systematic reviews and health technology assessments: a trade-off between the ideals of scientific rigor and the realities of policy making. IJTAHC 2004;20:177-183). The authors need to acknowledge that some see HTA as different from systematic reviews which others feel are different again from meta-analyses. Perhaps the simplest way to settle this issue in their manuscript is to develop a terminology box pointing out the relative differences between the study types. It will bring clarity to the manuscript.

The second major issue is the selection criterion the authors used, namely, that the term systematic review needed to be in the title or abstract for the document to be considered. Recent data indicates that only 50% of reports have this term in the title or abstract (Moher D, Tetzlaff J, Tricco A, Sampson M, Altman DG. Epidemiology and reporting characteristics of systematic reviews. PLoS Med 2007; 4(3):e78.doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0040078). At most I think this implies that the present results are likely an underestimate of the ‘true’ picture reported, in terms of their results. However, the authors need to explicitly point this out.

The third major issue is whether the journal used in this study had any specific
reporting requirements for using QUOROM when reporting meta-analyses of RCTs in the 'instructions to authors'. If not than perhaps the results are anticipated. Here (and related to the 2nd full paragraph of the “Strengths and weaknesses of the study” section of the discussion) the authors need to note that the mere existence of reporting guidelines or even a journal’s endorsement of them will not necessarily translate into use of them by authors (Altman DG. Endorsement of the CONSORT statement by high impact medical journals: survey of instructions for authors. BMJ 2005;330:1056-1057). Enforcement is likely the way to ensure reporting guidance’s are actually used by authors.

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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) Reference 1 likely provides an underestimate of the systematic review publication rate. The Moher reference above likely provides a more recent estimate of the rate;

(2) There are several places in the manuscript where the authors indicate the QUOROM was developed for RCTs of meta-analysis and systematic reviews. I think it is likely more accurate to state that QUOROM was more specifically developed for meta-analysis of RCTs;

(3) The last sentence of the first page of the introduction (beginning “This diagram…..”), the example (a) would likely not correspond to a systematic review;

(4) The results report on an inter observer reliability study. The authors should mention the existence of such a study in the methods section;

(5) In the last paragraph of the first page of the results the authors should insert “table 1” after “2005”

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interest.