Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 28 June 2007

Reviewer: Penny Whiting

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a very well written and clearly presented article. However, I think that the topic is of limited interest and that the scope may need to be broadened. I have the following suggestions for increasing the interest in this article:

• Assess the extent to which these reviews fulfil other of the QUORUM guidelines
• Include reviews of other types of study (e.g. reviews of test accuracy or qualitative studies) and compare how adherence to the QUORUM standard varies between these types of review
• Include reviews other than those published as HTA monographs e.g. by searching DARE for the same years

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

Why did you use MEDLINE to identify HTA reviews rather than screening the HTAs list of publications? Would this not have been a more accurate method of identifying reviews?

Does that HTA programme recommend that reviewers following QUORUM when reporting the results of their reviews? I seem to remember that it does (I have a recollection of signing something saying that I've followed QUORUM), in which case this should be made explicit in the article as this is likely to impact on the findings

Recommendations: I disagree with your recommendation that when including a study selection diagram that the QUORUM statement should be explicitly acknowledged. I always include a flow diagram when reporting the results of a review because I think they are very useful in understanding the review process not because I am following QUORUM. Your reasons for making this recommendation would also apply to all other aspects of the QUORUM statement and would suggest that in reporting the results of the review everything that follows QUORUM should be acknowledged.

I am also not sure that I agree with your recommendations regarding multiple content variables in a flow diagram. I think that this can be done and in some
cases is the most informative method of conveying information regarding the review process. In particular, I disagree with the recommendation regarding the inclusion of a single flow chart for each meta-analysis. I think that this could become very confusing and, if done appropriately, would be much more informative based on a single flow diagram.

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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)

Abstract – results. You state “there was always good or excellent interrate variability” – what for?

Introduction, second paragraph. You state that this diagram could only be produced if a single database is used. I'm not sure that this is the case – if you searched multiple databases and determined whether each citation referred to a single study then I think you could do this (although I don’t know that you’d want to). I think with the two situations where such a diagram could be produced you need an “or” rather than an “and” linking the two.

Results – paragraph 2. Could you make it clear how many of the studies you are talking about were actually systematic reviews.

Results – paragraph 3. You state that your figures for inter-rater reliability compare very favourably with kappas for handsearching for RCTs but this is not surprising given what you are looking for. You were screening a fairly small sample of SRs looking for a meta-analysis (i.e. pooled data which will usually have appropriate diagrams) and flow diagrams which will be much easier to find than RCTs through hand searching. I therefore don’t think this is really a fair comparison.

Information from Table 1 is repeated in Table 2. I think that these would be better combined as a single table

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Reject because too small an advance to publish

**Level of interest:** An article of insufficient interest to warrant publication in a scientific/medical journal

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.