Author's response to reviews

Title: Building blocks for meta-synthesis: data integration tables for summarising, mapping, and synthesising evidence on interventions for communicating with health consumers

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Author's response to reviews:

To Ms Iratxe Puebla
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Building blocks for meta-synthesis: data integration tables for summarising, mapping, and synthesising evidence on interventions for communicating with health consumers Rebecca E Ryan, Caroline A Kaufman and Sophie J Hill

We thank the referees for their constructive and helpful comments.

Referee 1:

Recommended that article be published without revision. No changes required.

Referee 2:

GENERAL COMMENTS

Point 1:
Thank-you for your summary of the major points within the article and for the valuable suggestions for improving the manuscript. In line with the suggestions you have raised here, we have agreed with the BMC Senior Editor to convert the paper to a “Correspondence” article. This is a more suitable format and addresses your concerns about the publication of this work as a research article.

Point 2:
Thankyou – we had dealt with this poorly. We have added more information about concurrent initiatives, including GRADE, SUPPORT, Summary of Findings tables and Cochrane overviews, in both the Background and Discussion sections, to more clearly place our work into context and to give a reader a description of the types of existing alternative approaches. We have provided a...
short history of how our work developed, so that it is clearer how it was concurrent but different. We have tried to strengthen the points that discuss why our approach developed in the way it did, and reflect on what we can learn or utilise from others.

COMPULSORY REVISIONS

Point 3:
We have substantially revised the manuscript with these comments in mind. In the Background we have expanded the section on interventions for communication and participation, following a Population, Interventions, Outcomes logic, and hope this makes the introduction clearer. We have provided more information about how the methods developed and the choices we made.

Taking your comments about lack of clarity and confusion into account, and the difficulties of following the methods and the results, we have decided to combine these sections, and provided a rationale for why we have done this. This is how we explained what we did:

This article describes the developmental process, methodological issues, in association with its output or result, so for ease of understanding we have combined the traditional Methods and Results section into one. The Discussion section describes the uses of the tables, their strengths and limitations, and future work.

We have also rewritten the text substantially and edited for clarity throughout and hope that this makes the work more accessible and readable.

Point 4:
Thank-you for your comments. We have edited the language used throughout so as not to overstate the importance and uses for this work. We have also expanded our discussion of the limitations of the data integration tables (see Discussion) and hope that this now represents a more balanced account of the methods and potential uses, as well as their limitations.

Point 5:
This is a good point. We had completed a small evaluation and include a reference to the preliminary findings in the Discussion section. We have re-drafted the text to indicate our thinking more clearly and how it could be tested. We have added substantially to the Discussion to more clearly acknowledge the limitations of this work as it currently stands (ie at the stage it is currently up to).

Specifically relevant to this point, we acknowledge that we have only used the tables as a tool on Consumers and Communication reviews, and this may not be a useful step for application beyond the scope of our group – and this requires evaluation.

We also note in the paragraph that follows that although we have used an
adaptation of this approach to develop the Rx for Change database, we have not yet conducted user testing and so there may be areas of confusion or ambiguity for users of summaries based on the data integration tables.

Point 6:
We apologise and have added page numbers (which we hope are retained in the uploading process).

Point 7:
We agree that the title was confusing and the lack of clear explanation in the Background about what we meant by ‘communicating with consumers’ could be easily misunderstood. We have amended the title to read ‘Building blocks for meta-synthesis: data integration tables for summarising, mapping, and synthesising evidence on interventions for communicating with health consumers’. This change should emphasise that the paper is on a method for synthesising the evidence on how to communicate with consumers, as you say.

To the Background section we have also added an outline of what we mean by interventions for ‘communication and participation’. We now define ‘consumers’ as well as the range of interventions that might be of interest to our group. We outline the role of our group in evaluating the evidence (through the production of systematic reviews), and hope that this will help to clarify our perspective, and how these terms are used throughout the paper.

Point 8:
We have substantially re-written the Background section and have tried to make the style of writing much clearer throughout. We also believe that having defined and described the area in greater detail, towards the start of the Background, that this may prove helpful in putting the work into context. We have also removed the reference to conducting systematic searches.

Point 9:
We agree that the explanation of overviews was inadequate and we hope that it is now improved. A simple explanation is in the 1st paragraph of the Background, and our earlier thinking about how to prepare an overview is included in the Background in a new paragraph (Overviews of the effects of interventions for communication and participation). We hope that this helps to provide a better context for the methods we developed. We have added examples of different overview questions in various places. In addition, we reference the Cochrane Handbook Overview Chapter.

Point 10:
We have re-written the section for Step 2, Assessing the reviews’ results. We use the same terms throughout and have tried to avoid confusing terms and statements. We have removed the terms ‘rating’ schemes in relation to our methods. We have tried to make the distinction between systems such as GRADE and our evidence assessment step clearer.
In the Background and Discussion, we describe and reference GRADE where appropriate and indicate our thinking in relation to its use.

Point 11:
We have altered the text and have placed this information in Step 3, Mapping the Evidence, where it is more appropriate.
See Methods/ Results; Step 3: Mapping the evidence - Structuring the reporting of outcomes using a taxonomy; paragraph 2

Point 12:
We have changed the use of the term ‘contextual information’, as this was confusing, and have altered the text throughout to describe this information as ‘characteristics’ of reviews, rather than contextual information.

Point 13:
Thank-you for your comments on the methods section of this paper, it has been very helpful in re-shaping the paper into its new form as a Correspondence paper. Our previous distinction between Methods and Results did seem confusing, as some of the methods are also the result (ie the developed method): distinguishing between the two was obviously not very helpful for readers, and so we have now combined the two sections into one.

We have also added extra detail at different stages of this process, so that hopefully readers are now guided through the process and the products of the process in a way that is easier to follow and is supported in a logical way by the tables accompanying the text. We have added sentences about various methodological dilemmas we faced and how we solved them.

Point 14:
We did not attempt to use the GRADE system in contributing to the evidence rating scheme, as at the time we were developing these methods the GRADE system was also under development. We have now made explicit mention of the GRADE approach in the Methods/ Results (see step 1: Summarising key characteristics of reviews - Quality assessment: quality of the review’s included trials), as well as provided our rationale for not yet using it in the current work.

We also make explicit mention of GRADE and other rating systems in the Discussion.

Point 15:
Our choice of wording was confusing. We have amended it and provided examples to assist understanding.

Point 16:
We have added details to the Synthesis section to explain this process and what this part of the data integration table adds to the findings of the review.
You are correct in saying that this section of the table is based on the conclusions of the originating review. However, we do believe that it goes further than simply the Implications for practice and/or research: this section of the table gives ‘bottom line’ statements about what the review does, and does not, show. This is based both on the review authors’ implications/ conclusions, but relies more heavily on a careful assessment of the evidence statements in the data integration table.

The two will often identify similar issues; however, the data integration table systematically assesses both the findings and the gaps in reviews, and this is a strength of the methods. Some review authors will do this comprehensively, some do not, but this synthesis step ensures that both findings and gaps are transparently reported as a summing up of the review. We believe that this adds value to the data integration table – both when it is used for dissemination of individual review results; and when used for the processes of meta-synthesis, particularly as the originating review may not be read by readers of the tables.

Point 17:
This is a valid point, and we are aware that the data integration tables do not represent a concise summary version of systematic reviews. We have edited Step 1 to explain the categories of information collected and why. We have now provided more information about our decision to include more, rather than less, detailed information.

Although the data tables are long, especially when compared with traditional summaries of systematic reviews, we have recently done some evaluation of this in users of our electronic bulletins, of which the data integration tables form the basis. Responses to a recent survey of users (now referenced) suggests that many do value having access to the table, not just to a brief summary of the main results, and this is something we were very heartened by.

You are correct in saying that such a long table is not necessarily a useful format for consumers or policy makers. However, these data integration tables are a methodological tool, not an end product in themselves, and for both consumer and policy maker audiences will require contextualisation and translation.

We have also reformatted Table 4 to a landscape view, with single text spacing to make it a more reader-friendly format, we hope that this is helpful.

Referee 3:
NO REVISIONS

Point 1.
Thank you for the summary of the article’s aim. However, in the light of other comments from you and Referee 2 about confusion in some sections and lack of clarity, we have made some changes to the Background which aim to tighten our focus on overviews, methods needed to undertake overviews of complex
interventions, and the role of the data integration table in that process. We hope that these changes may respond to comments you made about the role of the tables in a meta-synthesis (see later).

Point 3. No revisions required.

Point 4. No revisions required.

Point 7. No revisions required.

Point 8. No revisions requested. However, we have revised the Abstract to reflect the revisions we have now made.

COMPULSORY REVISIONS

Point 2:
- Thank you for this feedback. We have added a paragraph on the history of the work and hope this provides a clearer context for the choices we made. We have combined the Methods and Results section as we felt this aided clarification of the methods and their outputs and for each Step, aimed to guide the reader through the issues, methods and output. We have added information about the questions or methodological dilemmas we debated and provided more information on the modifications that were made. This was done for all steps 1-4.

- In response to your suggestion, we debated adding a table that identifies evidence statements for several reviews addressing one over-arching question, but decided against this. The reason is that without the other contextual information for the overview, it was misleading. However, we have tried to indicate more clearly how the data tables would contribute to the process of meta-synthesis but stop short of conducting a meta-synthesis. We have added more examples to illustrate the differences between systematic reviews, overviews, and overview aims and methods.

- The worked example of the data integration table (Table 4) has now been reformatted to improve readability. We have used a landscape table, and the text has been reformatted to single spacing.

Point 5:
This is an important point and one we have tried to clarify, particularly in the Background. The Background now contains a section on ‘Interventions for communication and participation’ where we outline some of the challenges for evidence synthesis. In the ‘Developments in the science of synthesis and meta-synthesis’ section we have tried to clarify why this approach was developed and where other approaches fell short when considering complex intervention reviews on communication and participation. We pick up these ideas in the Discussion and try to reflect on both the possible strengths of this approach (specifically for communication/ participation interventions) as well as the limitations of it, making comparisons with other approaches more explicit. And in the Discussion, we have added a short discussion of concurrent developments
and indicate what we could learn from them.

Point 6:
We agree that we may have overstated the implications of how the methods may be used. We have altered the Discussion to indicate the developmental stage we are at more clearly. We have tried to make it clearer that in the context of developing policy, the methods may assist in evaluating bodies of evidence in a theoretically-related whole.

Point 9:
We have altered the text throughout to describe this information as ‘characteristics’ of reviews, rather than contextual information.

ESSENTIAL REVISIONS
Thank-you for your suggestions regarding wording and editing of the paper. We have removed the term facile. We have substantially rewritten parts of the article that seemed to lead to most confusion.