Reviewer's report

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

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**Reviewer:** Atle Fretheim

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**General comments**

1. How can the findings from systematic reviews be disseminated most effectively to target audiences? And what are the best ways to, in an integrated manner, report the findings from several reviews on related issues (overviews, meta-synthesis)? These are timely and important issues that the authors of this manuscript address, with a specific focus on the topic area “consumer communication”.

The authors have developed a framework (“data-integration table”) for extracting information from systematic reviews which, they believe, can make review findings more readily accessible for target audiences, as well as facilitate the production of overviews (meta-synthesis). I am not sure that this report should be labelled "research article". If this paper is part of a larger project where the "data integration tables" will be evaluated, for instance, than I am inclined to see this as an article which comprises one part of a research project. However, standing alone I do not think it is reasonable to view this as "science". Having said that, I believe that the reflections and exercises that has led to the development of new tools, e.g. "data integration tables" may be interesting for a wider audience, thus warranting publication. But under a different category-heading than "research".

2. There are several similar initiatives that are ongoing, including within the Cochrane Collaboration itself, where the concept of Cochrane Overviews (not “Reviews”) has been introduced, and for instance the work done within the Support Collaboration on preparing structured summaries of systematic reviews. These are not necessarily competing approaches with the one that is presented in the current manuscript, but the authors should place their own work in relation to initiatives such as those mentioned, not just list some initiatives in the reference list (refês 2 to 7). How does this relate to Summaries of Findings Tables and GRADE, for instance?

I have several critical comments and I regard practically all of them as "Compulsory revisions".

3. The manuscript itself improves by being read many times. This is sometimes considered a compliment, but in this case I am afraid it is not. I found the paper a very tough read and struggled halfway through the manuscript 4 of 5 times before understanding what this really is about. Not being a native English
speaker may be part of the explanation, but I doubt that it is the most important. I am familiar with Cochrane reviews and the challenges related to dissemination and producing overviews of systematic reviews, so the difficulties I faced when reading the paper are not very likely due to lack of insight in these topic-areas. However, I know relatively little about “consumer communication”, and I believe this may have contributed to me having to struggle so much with the text. If the target audience is researchers interested in consumer communication, another publication channel may be more appropriate.

4. The authors are very keen to promote their “data integration table”-concept. Their choice of wording is unconventionally enthusiastic in the parts of the manuscript where they discuss the potential use and importance of their work – especially the first para in the Discussion. I am not sure whether to label this as charming enthusiasm or inappropriate over-selling of their “product”.

5. However, whether this is a useful tool is not really addressed, neither in the work they are reporting on having done, or otherwise in the text – and this is the key-issue. The authors refer to their own use of their tool, but are there for instance plans for user-testing? The combination of a) a manuscript that I found a tough read, b) enthusiastic claims of their tools’ usefulness and c) no “evidence” of the tool serving its purpose, is striking. Being a scientist reading a “research article” I am – and I should be – critical.

6. Lack of pagination is terribly annoying, but forgivable, of course.

Background-section

7. Already from the heading I became confused (or rather I misunderstood it, and thus became confused afterwards): “….synthesising evidence for communicating with health consumers”. To me this came across as this being an article on how to synthesise evidence in a best possible way in order to facilitate communication with health consumers. What the authors meant, though – I believe – was that the text is about how to synthesise evidence that address communicating with health consumers. These are two different things. However, to add to the confusion: The two are related, since summarising the evidence on interventions to improve communication with consumers is often done to facilitate communication with consumers. Confused? I was.

8. The Background-section should be tightened up. Many of the sentences were more confusing that clarifying to me, e.g. sentences 4 and 5 (“In the field of consumer communication…..”). Problems with conducting comprehensive searches and with accessibility are not specific for consumer communication? Or did I miss something? Confusing to me.

9. The explanation of “overviews” should be improved. Now, this concept is explained at the end of the para on top of the 2nd page of the Background, and then continues in the following paragraph. Please provide a clearer definition, or explanation, of what is (usually) meant with the term “overview”.

10. “Rating schemes to report outcomes”. What is meant by that? Grading the
evidence such as in the GRADE-system? Rating according to effect size? Perhaps an example would help (this issue becomes clearer later in the manuscript, but that is obviously too late for the reader who has not arrived there yet).

11. On the 3rd page of the Background, the authors bring in the issue of synthesising quantitative and qualitative data. I fail to see how that is relevant here.

Methods-section

12. “Contextual information” (1st sentence) is not, to me, the best term to use for what is later described under “Summarising the information” (further down on the same page). I am used to “contextual information” being more about settings etc. So, I was confused again, for a while.

13. The whole Methods-section came across as very theoretical and I had great difficulty understanding this. The dilemma, I suppose, is that the authors are trying to describe a very practical exercise they have conducted in a manner that is “scientific” and framed as a scientific paper, thus a theoretical methods-section is warranted. But the two do not seem to fit very well, and I guess that is why the Methods-section in particular is such a tough read. I do not have other constructive comments for improvement here than to allow for more space so that the reader can be guided slowly through each step. As it is now I have trouble understanding both what was done, and what the logic behind was. The “Identifying and extracting data”-section is particularly hard to grasp. E.g. “key categories of contextual information needed to interpret review results”. I did not, not more than vaguely, understand what that is about.

14. I found it odd that the GRADE-system was not mentioned in the “Developing an evidence rating scheme”-section, but I accept it if the fact is that the authors did not include GRADE among the “schemes” the assessed.

15. In the “Mapping key outcomes”-section: I found it confusing that outcomes reported in systematic reviews of interventions for consumer communication can be irrelevant in the field of consumer communication (see first sentence). Perhaps an example would help.

16. “Synthesis”-section: I was not convinced that this part of the data integration table provides more than a slightly expanded version of the conclusion from the original review. It would probably help if this is exemplified.

Discussion-section

17. As mentioned above: the degree of enthusiasm the authors express for their own innovation – the data integration table – is uncommon for a research article, especially when the authors actually do not have empirical data to support their claims. The authors mention “the goal of brevity”. I question whether a 16-page table represents a useful format for summaries of systematic reviews with policy makers and/or consumers in mind (although I realise that double spacing etc.
makes the table abnormally long in the manuscript).

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

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

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I head a unit in which some staff are involved in developing the GRADE-system for grading of evidence and Summaries of Findings Tables for Cochrane reviews. I am not sure, but these are possibly competing concepts with the "data integration tables" described in the manuscript.