Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 1 Date: 17 December 2008

Reviewer: Sandy Oliver

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NO REVISIONS

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
The authors do not pose a question; rather they pose a growing problem and a solution. The growing problem is the increasing number of systematic reviews and how these may be accessed in a varied and dynamic field. Their solution is to develop a tool for summarising and processing data from systematic reviews in a structured way, so that concise findings and strength of evidence can be synthesised from related systematic reviews. The aim of this effort is to collect and combine review data to answer over-arching questions.

3. Are the data sound?
Yes, the authors have taken great care to consider the strength of evidence and to have a second reviewer check the extracted data.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes. The data are Cochrane reviews, which are all publicly available.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes.

COMPULSORY REVISIONS

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The authors describe how they extract data from systematic reviews of evidence in a structured way to facilitate the meta-synthesis of this information. They report piloting the work but there is no description of how the data integration tables changed during their development, or why the final format for presenting the data is better than another. This could be reported in the results or the discussion.

The authors offer a detailed description of their final tool, but this description is from the perspective of researchers conducting a meta-synthesis and ‘managing
data’, rather than from the perspective of potential research users wishing to access evidence addressing broad questions. The final meta-synthesis, addressing a broad question, is not illustrated. The purpose of the ‘building blocks’ would be clearer to readers if several ‘building blocks’ addressing a single overarching question could also be illustrated, without all (or much at all of) their detailed text. I would like to request this as a compulsory revision.

Table 4 shows a worked example of data extracted from a single review, and records the data input into the table. Unfortunately the portrait rather than landscape layout make it difficult for readers to get a picture of the data for this single review. It is unclear whether the readers should only be reading columns individually, or whether there is value in comparing the data across the columns. This is an instance where double line spacing or 1.5 line spacing requested for journal submissions mitigates against clarity and it spreads the text over too many pages to benefit from the visual display of a table. I would recommend steps 2-4 at least, be illustrated in a landscape table, with single spacing for the text. I would like to request this as a compulsory revision.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
I am unclear how these data integration tables differ from methods used by other authors cited as preparing overviews. I would be interested to know whether this method is an advance on what has been previously published, or better suited to the topic of communication, and if so why. I wonder how other methods might fall short (if only for the topic of communication) and therefore necessitate the developments reported here. I would like to request this as a compulsory revision.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
The authors describe the detail of a single step in the preparation of overviews. It is an important step. However, they conclude with a statement that I believe goes beyond this single step. To claim that these tables enable evaluation of the body of evidence as a theoretically-related whole I think there is a need to focus a little more on the overarching questions that determine which reviews are to be processed with data integration tables prior to meta-synthesis.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
I struggle with the term ‘contextual information’. This is a key term for describing the integration tables. My understanding of ‘contextual information’ of a review would indeed include its title, authors and background. A description of the main features of a review does not appear to be contextual, but characteristic. I would like to request the authors address this as a compulsory revision.

ESSENTIAL REVISION
The paper would benefit from some minor editing. The term ‘facile’ is derogatory, so “a format as succinct and facile as…” would read better as “a format as succinct and straightforward as…”. I would like to request this as a minor, but
essential revision.

**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 interests