Reviewer's report

Title: Most bowel symptoms do not indicate colorectal cancer and polyps: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Tom Marshall

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Most bowel cancer symptoms do not indicate colorectal cancer and polyps: a systematic review
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Overall comment
This is a systematic review of the evidence for association between symptoms and a diagnosis of colorectal cancer. It is an appropriate approach to a clinically relevant question.

The review appears to have been conducted well and reasonably written up. The papers identified and reviewed are appropriate.

The findings are not very novel and mainly draw attention to the variable quality of research in this area. The discussion could be improved by including some further comment on the papers reviewed, problems with consistency of data extraction and reference to some recent literature (probably published at about the time the paper was submitted).

Major compulsory revisions

Abstract
The abstract is clear however some information is not included in the abstract.

• The authors should clarify whether the studies were selected on the basis of study methodology (case control, cohort or retrospective cohort) or entirely on the basis of whether a 2x2 table could be constructed (which is theoretically possible with a cross-sectional study).

• The authors should clarify in the abstract whether the studies concerned were only of symptoms in patients presenting to primary care or first contact health professionals or included patients referred by primary care / first contact health professionals to secondary care professionals.

Methods
The search strategy seems reasonable although the inclusion criteria are described. Data extraction is described.

• The observation that there were issues of uncertainty or discrepancy between the data extraction sets in 50% of papers probably merits some comment in the Discussion.
The method of analysis is described. However as I am not familiar with the sROC linear regression method (Moses and Littenberg) or hierarchical modelling of ROC curves, the appropriateness of the method probably needs comment by a statistician.

Results
The results of the search are described clearly. The relationship between study quality and rectal bleeding is described in some detail as is the difference in the relationship between rectal bleeding and cancer and the relationship between rectal bleeding and polyps. Similarly detailed results are presented for weight loss.

Discussion
• This is reasonable although the authors should comment on the interpretation of the findings in relation to whether symptoms are recorded in patients presenting in primary care / first contact settings and symptoms recorded in referred patients.
• The high degree of discrepancy in data extraction from papers merits some comment.
• There is a very recent systematic review that could be referred to in the discussion.
  [Shapley M. et al Positive predictive values of #5% in primary care for cancer: systematic review BJGP September 2010]

Minor essential revisions
Some odd typographical errors
In Method section of Abstract:
“to provide to provide a 2x2 table”
Reference 28:

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests