Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Reporting and Methodologic Quality of Cochrane Neonatal Review Group Systematic Reviews

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 14 August 2008

**Reviewer:** Roger Soll

**Reviewer’s report:**

Thank you for the opportunity to review AlFaleh and Al-Omran manuscript, “Reporting and methodologic quality of Cochrane Neonatal Review Group systematic reviews”. First, let me be clear about the obvious conflict of interest. As the Editor of the Cochrane Neonatal Group, I am not only very interested in what the authors have to say but also clearly biased regarding their assessments. In addition, I have reviewed this manuscript when submitted to another journal. That said, perhaps other reviewers should be sought to judge the importance of this work.

My previous comments are essentially unchanged from my previous review. The study methodology is well described. The authors reviewed a random sample of published CNRG systematic reviews. The reviews were evaluated using the QUOROM statement to assess reporting quality while the Oxman-Guyatt Overview Quality Assessment Questionnaire (OQAQ) to assess methodological quality. Sixty-one systematic reviews were assessed. Overall, the reviews had good quality with minor flaws based on the OQAQ total scores (a mean of 4.5 with a 95% confidence interval of 4.27 to 4.77). Room for improvement was noted in areas regarding the title, abstract reporting, a priori plans for heterogeneity assessment and how to handle heterogeneity if it exists, assessment of publication bias. In addition, reporting of agreement among reviewers, documentation of trials flow, and discussion of possible biases in the review process were noted.

Clearly, as an editor of the Cochrane Neonatal Group, this assessment is of interest to me. Some of the criticisms are inherent to recommendations made by the editorial group. It would be interesting if the reviewers pulled the specific editorial suggestions from the Cochrane Neonatal Review Group editors (available on our website) and noted whether the deficiencies were inherent to our recommendations (as they well may be) or simply a variation amongst authors that the editors did not address. Certain issues that the authors criticize are obviously based on policies that the Neonatal Review Group has articulated that are different from those used by other groups or the expectations of other experts in the field of systematic reviews. For example, the Cochrane Neonatal Review Group does not recommend a random effects model in its analysis. The fixed effects model is used in all cases. It is the belief of the Cochrane Neonatal Review Group editors that heterogeneity is mostly an a priori clinical decision (as to whether or not the trials are truly groupable based on patient population and
intervention). Statistical heterogeneity, if it exists, should be noted. If statistical heterogeneity is present, but not noted in the review, this is a valid and important criticism of the Cochrane reviews.

Some of the other issues that are criticized, including the comprehensiveness of the abstract, are clearly editorial decisions made at the level of the editorial group and not based on the reviewer. There are word limits that need to be applied to make the abstracts readable (and accessible on PubMed); therefore, many of the methods can only be referenced to other available sources. It would be important if the authors noted whether or not there were references in the abstracts to the other resources available (through the Neonatal Cochrane Review Group website).

As much as I found this extremely useful as an editor of the Cochrane Review Group, and will look carefully at our review and editorial process to mitigate some of the deficiencies noted by AlFaleh and colleagues and Dr. Al-Omran, I am unclear whether or not a general readership will be interested in this detail regarding Cochrane reviews. Since there are other publications that show that the reviews of other review groups are of less quality, it might be important for the neonatal community to know that the Cochrane reviews are relatively trustworthy based on these methodologic concerns.

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

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:

please note: having read the manuscript, I have two strong conflicts of interest:
1. I am the editor of the Cochrane Neonatal Review Group, whose work is being evaluated in this study
2. I have previously reviewed the article for another journal. This manuscript is essentially unchanged from my previous review. I have included my previous comments below.