Reviewer's report

Title: Systematic review of mass media interventions designed to improve public recognition of stroke symptoms, emergency response and early treatment

Version: 1 Date: 18 August 2010

Reviewer: Ben J Smith

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There is value offered in the review that the authors have presented here, although this would have been far greater for the reader with more attention to the characteristics of the intervention studies being reviewed. This includes both the intervention strategies tested and the methodological qualities of the studies.

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

The Background section needs to be strengthened by consideration of the wider literature of relevance to the research questions. This includes research about public knowledge of stroke symptoms and previous reviews of the evaluation of stroke education and awareness interventions. Some examples of this literature are:


The Background section should state the reason that this review is needed with reference to this existing body of literature.

In the Background it is stated that: “The evidence base for mass media campaigns more widely is limited...”. One Cochrane review is then cited. The literature about the impact of mass media campaigns is quite extensive and a number of review articles and reference texts provide guidance about the design of mass media campaigns. See for example Hornik RC. Public Health Communication: Evidence for Behavior Change. New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum and Assoc; 2002 (ch 19 especially). The Background section should acknowledge at least some of this broader literature. The specific questions concerning the impact of mass media interventions that need to be addressed
could then be stated.

The authors assert that mass media campaigns are complex interventions, according to the MRC framework. A number of readers may not agree with this assertion. The statement needs justification.

In the Data Extraction section it is stated: “Intervention development for each study was classified using the MRC Framework for reevaluating complex interventions”. This further indicates the need to justify the classification of media campaigns as complex interventions. In addition the elements of the MRC Framework need to be described. The reason that the MRC Framework is considered useful for the current review should be made clear.

The Results section requires more information about the intervention studies reviewed, especially given the intention to be a systematic review (i.e. assessing the methodological quality of studies) and narrative synthesis (usually entailing some description of the interventions). There is information given about the studies in the supplementary Tables, but major details from these tables need to be brought into the Results so that findings have greater meaning for the reader. Some basic information about the studies that is needed includes their location, target groups, duration, mix of strategies, frequency of delivery and overall duration.

The Discussion, in its second paragraph, introduces some methodological detail about the studies which is not described in the Results. While commentary and interpretation is appropriate in the Discussion there should be information included in the Results about sampling methods, sample size, major characteristics of respondents (e.g. gender, age, health status) and follow-up period post campaign delivery.

As with the Background section the Discussion needs to consider the wider literature about education and awareness interventions relevant to stroke, and the available evidence and guidelines concerning mass media campaigns. The findings of this review should be compared with this literature.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

The minor revisions needed will be described under each of the section headings of the manuscript.

Abstract
- The Methods should refer to the publication period of included articles, and the types of interventions reviewed.
- The Results refers to “structured development” in the second sentence, which needs clarification.
- The fourth sentence of the Results refers to the “important over 65s”, which could be better described as people 65 years and older.
- The fifth sentence of the Results needs rewriting, clarifying “presentation within
two hours” and “impact on … service organisation”.

-Axiomatic comments should be removed, such as in the Abstract, last sentence, “New campaigns should be robustly evaluated” (also the Conclusion of the paper, 5th sentence, “…need for the results to be published in peer reviewed journals”.

Background
-First sentence what is meant by “stroke units
-The full name for MRC should be given when first used
-The final sentence states that the theoretical basis of campaigns is assessed, but this is not covered in the Results or Discussion.

Results
-There should be a statement here about the number of studies screened, assessed, excluded (with reasons) and included.

-The description of the study by Silver et al needs to clarify how a decrease in knowledge in the control group was possible by using alternative wording (e.g., the prevalence of knowledge was lower in the follow-up sample). It should be made clear whether the television interventions which had a significant effect were high and/or low intensity.

-In the description of the Hodgson et al study it is stated that “…six months after the end of the second campaign, these had both fallen”. Please clarify what this means.

-A sentence describing the findings of the Morgenstern et al study says that there was evidence of impact upon health professionals because the decrease in time to hospital presentation in the comparison community was not associated with treatment rates. This need rewriting as the logic of this statement is not readily apparent.

-Albert et al’s intervention is referred to as “multi-faceted”. Further detail is needed.

Discussion
-Some broad comments are made under Major Compulsory Revisions above.

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

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