Reviewer’s report

Title: Interventions targeting social isolation in older people: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Kaisu Pitkala

Reviewer’s report:

This is a systematic review examining all published randomized controlled trials and other controlled trials investigating effects of . It uses both qualitative and quantitative data. It is well-structured and very nicely written. In addition, it is timely since previous reviews have become old. However, I have some additions to the articles authors have found. In addition, I have some concerns regarding the definitions of concepts of social isolation and loneliness.

Background

The authors try to define social isolation as lack of social integration or minimal quantity and quality of social relationships. The latter (quality) refers to subjective dimensions of this social relationships (=emotional loneliness). Social isolation is usually seen as something objectively measurable such as being alone, number of social contacts/time or number of potential people around (see Routasalo et al. Gerontology 2006) whereas loneliness is more of an inner feeling. In epidemiological studies social isolation has rarely had impact on health or mortality. The studies authors are referring when justifying their approach are about social integration – not about social isolation. Social integration (or social activity) is a concept more about how actively a person is involved with his/her social networks/society. Social integration AND loneliness have harmful effects on health and mortality – not being alone/number of social contacts per se.

The authors state that the prevalence of social isolation (how is this defined in this case??) is only 7-17%. These are not representative concerning older people’s feelings of loneliness can be up to 40% of older populations (see these references: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_069_en.pdf or Savikko et al. arch Gerontol Geriatr 2005).

The authors justify well the target and need for update of this review.

Methods

Methods of the review are very carefully described. The key words and search strategy are presented nicely. However, why did the authors not include words: social integrity or social inactivity or social activity in their search strategy?

The way the authors have included but separated RCTs and other controlled trials in their presentation is well-justified. However, the quality assessment of RCTs and other controlled trials is not commensurable. Controlled trials have more risk of bias than RCTs.

The authors justification for doing narrative synthesis of their findings is
Results:
Because of the search strategy or for some other reasons, the authors have not included these trials in their review. Maybe they want to consider them or explain why they have no included them in their review:

Andersson L. Human Relations 1084
Andersson L. Soc Sci med 1985
Banks & Banks J Gerontol med Sci 2002
van Rossum et al. BMJ 1993
Caserta & Lund Gerontologist 1993
Haley et al. Gerontologist 1987
Hopman-Rock & Westhoff. Tijdschr Gerontol Geriatr 2002
Wikstrom E. Aging Mental health 2002
Scharlach et al. Psychol Aging 1987

In addition, the Routasalo et al. 2009 study has additional report:
Pitkala et al. J Gerontol 2009

The findings are presented very clearly and in detail. The structure of reported articles is wise. This part is very helpful when future researchers are planning further trials.

Discussion
This section is very thoughtful and well-balanced. However, although authors have presented trials intervening “social isolation”/loneliness they only look at loneliness or social isolation as primary outcome measure. The background section has a justification for this “social isolation”/loneliness target because they have harmful effects on health and mortality. Do any of their trials try to see their intervention effects on health, quality of life, psychological well-being or mortality? Social isolation and loneliness are still surrogates.

Overall, the review has novel findings and I recommend to publish it.

Smaller remarks:
The first paragraph in Background section is probably unnecessary.

**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