Reviewer's report

Title: Systematic Review of the Quality of Osteoporosis Guidelines

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Reviewer: Dr Françoise Cluzeau

Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Advice on publication: Accept after discretionary revisions

This paper reports on the evaluation of 21 guidelines for the management of postmenopausal osteoporosis using a validated instrument. On the whole the paper is well structured and clearly reported. I have a number of comments:

1. I think the title of the paper is misleading. The wording: 'systematic review' has a specific meaning and is linked to a standard methodology that is widely known. I would suggest using: 'Systematic assessment of the quality of clinical guidelines' instead, as in the last sentence of Paragraph 3, page 3.

2. Page 2. Paragraph 2. "Although clinical applicability is higher". I am not sure what this means: eg: that their potential field for their application in clinical practice is high? The sentence needs rewording.

3. I am unsure what inclusion criteria were used for selecting the guidelines. I could not see it described anywhere in the methods. Many documents published with the title "guidelines" are not guidelines and probably should not be assessed as such with the instrument. I think the authors should make it clear what criteria they used (for example, did they use only documents that contained recommendations; and perhaps give an example). If they did not use any criteria then they should discuss the implications for assessment in the discussion. A paragraph could be added to the methods section, after search strategy, stating clearly was criteria were used.

4. Conversely, Page 5, first sentence. "21 were retrieved and on assessment met our inclusion criteria". What criteria?

5. The assessment of the guidelines with the appraisal instrument relies heavily on having background information to their development. Was this information available for the guidelines that were assessed? or was there any attempt at collecting that information from the guideline authors? This should be made explicit.
6. Page 3: Search strategy. A list of words used in the search is presented. However, the title of one of the documents assessed (ref 17) is: "An evidence based review of the management of osteoporosis". Is this a review, or a guideline?

7. I think there should be a sub section in the methods called "data analysis". This would make it clear what analyses were used.

8. Page 7. Paragraph 2. I think a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.63 is actually quite low. Coefficients above 0.65 are usually considered satisfactory. Therefore the first sentence of the paragraph should be toned down.

9. Page 7, Paragraph 5. "Eighteen of 21 guidelines". This is descriptive and should be placed at the beginning of the results section.

10. Page 7. Last paragraph. What statistical test was used to analyze differences in mean quality for the different variables? I could not see any details about that in the methods section.

11. Discussion: Page 8. The last section of the first sentence should be reworded (see Point 2).

12. Page 8, Paragraph 3: patient input. This sentence should be expanded. Why is patient involvement important for the quality of guidelines?

13. To follow on from Points 3 and 4, there should be some acknowledgment about the difficulties involved in searching for guidelines.

14. I think the last paragraph of the discussion should be augmented with a statement about the validity of the assessment in relation to the quality of guidelines, stating that the methodological quality of guidelines is a prerequisite to 'good' guidelines, but not sufficient to ensure that they will improve clinical practice and outcome for patients. It could also mention the need for research methodologies on the impact of EBM guidelines in practice.

15. References: Reference 21. I have been unable to retrieve the document using the URL address provided. I think all the URL addresses in the references should be more detailed, including the date when the documents were retrieved.

16. Also, I am surprised that the search did not include a guideline on osteoporosis published by the Royal college of Physicians in London in 1998 and that has been recently updated. This guideline is available on the RCP website at the URL address:

Competing interests:

None declared.