Author's response to reviews

Title: Systematic reviews of complementary therapies - an annotated bibliography. Part 1: Acupuncture

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PDF covering letter
Responses on comments from peer reviewers

We appreciate the comments of the peer reviewers which greatly helped to improve the papers (particularly regarding the description of aims).

Acupuncture – White

• Paragraph 3-6 (aims): We revised the description of aims and emphasized the aim to provide a transparent summary
• the suggestions given in the minor comments were followed

Acupuncture – Hammerschlag

• General comments, paragraph 2 (quality of reviews): In the tables the column features gives information on the quality of reviews. We also scored the quality of reviews using the published scale by Oxman et al., however, we found this scoring so problematic that we consider it necessary to discuss this in a separate methodological paper which is in preparation
• Methods, comment 1: in the early nineties a number of meta-analyses have been published which did not formally describe the literature search. We thought that such reviews should not be excluded a priori as they might be informative for readers.
• Methods comment 2: multi-intervention reviews typically include a large number of trials and give very little details on the included studies. For a reader who wants to get an overview on a CAM intervention for a defined condition these reviews rarely provide in-depth information. On the other hand, if they include a larger number of trials they cannot be neglected. Reviews focussing on a CAM intervention are, in our view, more likely to be comprehensive for the question adressed, even if the number of trials included is small.
• Results/Discussion, comment 1: unfortunately, we did not properly documented which review was identified from which source. As the search strategy for systematic reviews in Medline became available only after we had done most of our basic searches the majority of reviews has first been identified through the Cochrane Field database.
• Results/Discussion, comment 2: we did not expand our discussion on the comparison with the conclusions of the NIH panel as we felt that an adequate discussion of this would be too lengthy for the paper.
• Results/Discussion, comment 3: the relevant paragraph was modified taking the comments into account.
• We followed most suggestions given in the specific comments and made some changes in the references. Lee’s paper was included in Medline Silverplatter only in August 2000; furthermore we have been unable to obtain a copy of this paper in the meantime.

Herbal medicine – Wootton

• Paragraph 3: we revised the naming of herbs (Latin names in parentheses at first citation in the text and in table headlines).
• Paragraphs 4 and 5: although we appreciate the comments raised and agree to most of the points made we felt unable to integrate an in-depth discussion of these delicate issues.

Herbal medicine – Roberts
• General response: this peer reviewer seems to have struggled with the problem that our paper discusses efficacy issues although this was not our primary objective. As mentioned in the response to White we modified our description of aims and hope that this decreases the problem a little bit.

• Paragraph 2 (overlap between reviews): we included information on the total number of trials covered by the reviews on a given topic.

• Paragraphs 3 and 4: The intended audience for our papers are persons who want to know on which topics systematic reviews are available and how they can be found, and who want to get a crude idea what these reviews report.

• Other comments, major: The Cochrane CAM Field database integrates references from a variety of sources including the databases mentioned by the reviewer. We included a phrase in the first paper providing this information. Still, searching systematic reviews in a comprehensive manner is difficult. Two of the reviewers (AV and KL) who regularly monitor the CAM research literature and run databases on these topics screened a huge list of references and abstracts in the screening process. Unfortunately, our resources were too limited to document this step in a transparent manner.

• Other comments, minor (Chinese literature): we deleted this statement. What we wanted to say here is that we did not search Chinese databases. This has the consequence that most Chinese journals have not been covered through our search as they are not listed in Western databases.

• Other comments, minor (search strategy for review): has been added as a box to the acupuncture paper.

• Other methods, minor (number of reviewers): We simply did not have the resources to have each paper assessed by at least 2 reviewers.

• Other comments, minor (quality of reviews): As said in the response to Dr. Hammerschlag’s comments we scored the quality with a published scale but found this very problematic. Assessing the comprehensiveness of a literature search in CAM is very difficult as non-database searches which are difficult to describe play a major role. For the table we therefore decided to use a simple and transparent assessment method. We are aware that we cannot guarantee that the searches were truly comprehensive.

• Other comments, minor (inclusion criteria): we added some information in parentheses.

• Other comments, minor (overlap): we included information of the total number of trials covered by the reviews on a given topic in the text.

Homeopathy – Lewith

no responses

Review on all 3 paper – Moore

• As stated above we included a formal assessment of the quality of the reviews using a published scale. As this proved problematic we found it inadequate to include this information in the submitted papers but are preparing a methodological paper describing our results and the problems we faced.

• We corrected a number of spelling errors.