Reviewer's report

Title: A scoping review of research regarding CAM and mass media: Looking back, moving forward

Version: 1 Date: 13 March 2008

Reviewer: Jeremy Segrott

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses an important topic and seeks to provide an overview of current research on the mass media and CAM, as well as setting out how the field might move forward. It is clearly written and well structured. There are three key issues which I feel need to be addressed.

1 - Major Compulsory Revisions

My first and main concern with the paper is the tension between its aim of broadly scoping the field on the one hand, and its narrower concern with selecting studies that reach a certain quality threshold on the other, determined through the use of quality assessment. On page 7 the authors suggest that scoping studies do not normally utilise quality assessments, and that to this extent the paper is "more akin to a systematic review".

Of the 16 articles identified as relevant, 8 were excluded, which means that only half the current research is reviewed. If the aim of the study is to scope the field, I wonder if the kind of quality assessment used is the right one (at this stage at least). Whilst I acknowledge that methodological quality is important, I feel that some of the excluded studies could be included, perhaps with suitable caveats as to any methodological concerns. The quality criteria in Table 2 are about methodological quality, and perhaps some of the excluded studies generate important insights or identify key areas of work. I am reminded of Lambert’s (2006) discussion of the need to judge and critique research both on the basis of methodological quality, but also on the importance of the findings themselves.

Secondly, I feel that the exclusion of research looking at the internet is a weakness. The fact that consumption of information on the internet is more interactive does not in itself mean that it is less important.

Thirdly, the authors suggest that most research on CAM and the mass media has focused on representation rather than reception. I think there is probably quite a lot of work on how people may use media representations on CAM, but it is set within broader studies looking at people's use of CAM and their attitudes towards it. Thus, while the authors' search strategy is comprehensive and valid in its own right, it may not have captured such papers.

2 - Minor Essential Revisions

The title of the paper needs to include the term 'Complementary and Alternative
Medicine’, as well as the acronym CAM.

Formatting: the style of headings and sub headings could be changed so that main headings are in bold, whilst sub headings are not.

Pages 8-9: the difference between synthesizing and summarizing could be made slightly clearer here - i.e. which one produces more aggregation?

Page 10: The first full paragraph on this page states that "All articles were published prior to 1998, with subsequent years having a maximum of three articles published in any year". The meaning here could be clarified.

Page 11: Under 'Journalist sources' I am not sure what 'international newspapers' are - i.e. papers produced in different countries, or papers produced for consumption by an international readership.

3 - Discretionary Revisions

Page 14: I was interested in the authors' discussion of how research studies tend to cover "either natural health products ... or CAM in general ... thus treating CAM as a monolithic concept." While I would agree that CAM should not be treated as a monolithic concept, I am not sure that I agree that all studies that look at CAM as a general concept necessarily do this.

Page 15 (Discussion): the authors could extend their discussion of why the media seek to minimise attention to the risks of CAM. I was also interested in the broader issue of why risk might be important in portrayals of CAM. Is CAM as a whole riskier than conventional medicine, how is the concept of risk constructed, and does the media portray conventional medicine in similar or different ways?

References


What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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