Reviewer's report

Title: The role of advisory committees for large studies: an observational study

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Reviewer: Susan Michie

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This is an observational study describing the recommendations made by the advisory committees of a large, UK multi-component study. There are five sets of advisors: the co-applicants/collaborators, a cultural and social perspectives sub-group, experts, service users and carers, and international advisors. The extent to which their recommendations were acted on was documented and themes to which categorise the recommendations were created (scientific, pragmatic, resources, collaboration and committee-relevant advice.) The paper finishes with six recommendations for other large studies.

Whilst the aim of studying the process and outcome of study advisory groups is a good one, there are several limitations with both this study and the way it is reported.

Major compulsory revisions

1. No aim or research question is reported in the Abstract; in the Introduction, it was described as “to inform the committee and advice infrastructure for future research programmes.” To constitute a scientific contribution to the field, both the aim and much of the reporting needs to be less vague and parochial.

2. The study is not set in relevant empirical or theoretical research. For example, there are relevant literatures about patient/public involvement, implementation of recommendations of advisory committees and processes of decision-making that should be drawn on.

3. There is a lack of scientific methodology in the conduct of the study. In the Abstract, there is reference to “implementation criteria” and “identified criteria for decision-making”; it is not clear whether these are the same or how the criteria were developed or operationalised. Methods for producing categories or identifying benefits and costs of the advice are not reported and so cannot be evaluated or replicated. Methods should be made sufficiently clear to be replicability.

4. No reliability or validity assessment was made; this should be conducted.

5. The paper is written in the style of a study report rather than a journal article, with a description of the study being investigated in the second paragraph and a long and discursive discussion that is only loosely tied to the data presented. There is a large section on the experience of users and carers; whilst an
extremely important topic, it does not fit with the balance of the data presented.

6. There are several statements that go beyond the data, for example, that the advice improved the scientific quality of the study and that recording non-implemented recommendations was “a means of defining the limits of current knowledge”. External validity is another problem: there are problems of generalising from the experience of one study to general recommendations for large studies. This issue needs to be acknowledged and discussed.

7. Table 2 presents data by month, which is not referred to in the text and is not relevant to the paper.

In its current form, it is difficult to identify what this study adds to the literature or what its citable statements are. The data do, however, constitute a useful basis for developing a research proposal in this area.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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'