Reviewer's report

Title: A systematic review of integrated working between care homes and health care services.

Version: 1 Date: 5 July 2011

Reviewer: John Gladman

Reviewer's report:

This is an important paper with important findings. I think that some minor changes and trimming would help it to be a bit more focussed and digestible, and hence give it more impact.

Major compulsory revisions

1 In the results, on page 11, the sentence “Overall the interventions were characterised by heterogeneity” is unclear and ambiguous. I think it means that there was a wide variety of interventions tested in the studies selected for this review. This is really not very surprising since the selection process was not to find similar interventions but to find papers with interventions that were delivered with some degree of integration. I think this whole section could be shortened: it is not possible to test the effect of “integration” using studies of this sort. To do this, one would need to compare the results of studies testing the same sort of intervention but using delivery methods with differing degrees of integration. The description of interventions and methods and outcomes is not very important once this obvious point has been made. Much of pages 10-12 could be removed or abbreviated. The same applies to tables 2-4 – they would needed if a meta-analysis or some sort of discussion of the results of the studies is required, but as so obviously these studies are incomparable, these details do not really contribute.

2 The real results begin at the bottom of page 12. In contrast to the earlier results, I think these could be elaborated further. For example, the key finding that higher level of integration were associated with a greater potential for integrated working needs some elaboration to avoid it seeming to be a tautology, and to give the evidence upon which this statement is made. It implies, I presume, that high level and strategic links are needed to produce integration at a client level, as opposed to the more usual grass roots level attempts at doing so. This has quite major policy implications and so a result as important as this needs to be better argued.

3 I felt there was a poor link between the Discussion and the results. The initial focus upon the outcomes of the studies brings attention to the least important part of this review. The comment on cost does not clearly mirror data in the results section, which does not mention costs.

4 The comment that studies may have used a disease specific approach or outcome is not relevant here, and is somewhat unfair. If a trialist wishes to ask a
disease specific question (and they can be justified) then of course they will use such an approach, whether or not their intervention is delivered in an integrated manner or not.

5 I am not sure that there is a need for more research into “the types of interventions which best support integrated working”, or perhaps I am not sure what this actually means. I think from these findings it seems that more work is needed to understand how integrated working can be achieved, and to see the effect of doing so upon cost, staff factors and patient/resident outcomes, and then perhaps whether the benefits of more expensive forms of integration are worth it.

6 Abstract conclusions do not match aims, and are not I think the main conclusions anyway

Minor essential revisions
P3, results, line 5: managers’ not manager’s
P8, final paragraph: parenthesis are opened but not closed.
P22, ref 27 Geriatrics not Gertiatricrs.

Discretionary revision
1 To me, the paragraph at the bottom of page 13, which describes the nature of integration, would go better starting this paragraph. Or some change to the wording to help the logic flow would help.

Overall, I would try to direct attention towards Table 7 about barriers and facilitators, explain more fully the link between the level of organisational integration and what happens to residents, and reduce the emphasis on describing the interventions, methods and outcomes of the studies used to derive these findings.

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 have no competing interests.