Author's response to reviews

Title: Researching the mental health needs of hard-to-reach groups: managing multiple sources of evidence.

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Author's response to reviews: see over

**Response to reviewers**

We are grateful to Donald Nease and Vikram Patel for their thoughtful and constructive comments on this paper, and to the Associate Editor of BioMed Central Editorial Team for the summary of the required key revisions.

**Associate Editor’s requirements:**

We suggest that you clarify, particularly in the background, that this manuscript a new methodological approach, critique other methods for synthesizing evidence, and provide a cogent case for what this new methodology adds.

Response: We have added a new sub-section to the Background, entitled ‘The need for a new methodological approach’, in which we explain that this is the focus of our paper. Within this we provide a critique of existing approaches to understanding complex health problems, including an expanded set of examples of partial synthetic approaches. We have also amended the background and concluding sections of the abstract to highlight the focus on methodology in this paper. Then, in both the discussion of study strengths and the final section on implications, we have extended our arguments for the value of this new methodology, both in the particular case of our study and more generally for research into complex health service problems.

*We recommend that you copyedit the paper to improve the style of written English.*

Response: we have reviewed the style and grammar of the paper, and made numerous changes to improve the standard of English.

**Donald Nease’s comments:**

Major Compulsory Revisions: 1 & 2. We have added text in the section on Illustration of Method, to demonstrate how this methodology has produced findings which challenged our assumptions, and
how we have dealt with divergent evidence. 3. In the discussion of study limitations, we have added a sentence and reference on the complexities of gathering information from stakeholders.

Minor Essential Revisions: We have corrected the three grammatical errors.

Discretionary Revisions: We have added the numbers of data items which were included in each of the six data sources.

Vikram Patel’s comments:

1&2. Aims of paper: We acknowledge that there was a lack of clarity in the previous version of the paper as to its principal aim, and have revised it to make clear that our focus is on methodologies (see earlier response to Associate Editor). We have also substantially reduced the text and associated references on common mental health problems in the first part of the Background section, to further sharpen the focus on methods.

3. The search filter for the scoping review: this is available to the editors and/or readers on direct request.

4. Concepts from the scoping review. Our intention here is to summarise the key concepts which informed the direction of the subsequent information gathering phase. It is not possible in this paper to give specific examples of how this worked, and this is the subject of papers in preparation which address the substantive findings from our information gathering phase. To improve clarity we have reduced the text and references in this section of the paper, and stated in subsequent text that key concepts informed the direction of our investigations.

5. Utility of method. Our response to the Associate Editor has already covered this concern: in both the discussion of study strengths and the final section on implications, we have strengthened our arguments for what our methodology adds both in particular and more generally for health services research. We have also added a paragraph to the Implications section, in which we acknowledge that it is not yet possible to judge the ultimate value of such an exhaustive approach to information gathering and synthesis.