Reviewer’s report

Title: Supervision, support and mentoring interventions for health practitioners in rural and remote areas: a systematic review and thematic synthesis of the literature to identify key mechanisms for successful outcomes

Version: 1 Date: 4 October 2013

Reviewer: Saravana Kumar

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for asking me to review this manuscript. This is an extremely interesting manuscript which reports on a systematic review and thematic synthesis of the literature on key mechanisms for successful implementation of supervision, support and/or mentoring programmes for rural and remote health care practitioners.

I must commend the authors on taking on such a complex topic as, while supervision, support and/or mentoring programmes are common, the evidence base underpinning this area is sparse, conflicting and equivocal. The thoroughness with which this review has been undertaken is to be commended as is the innovative use of thematic synthesis in summarising the findings. I congratulate the authors on their work.

I have some comments/queries that require some thought and clarification. They are outlined below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

• Search strategy – I note that the systematic review topic is focussed on rural and remote health care practitioners and yet in the terms used for searching, nursing is missing. I can see the inclusion of medical and allied health but is there a reason why nursing was excluded?

• Search strategy – the search timeframes is stated to be between 1999-2012 but no justification for the selection of these time points have been provided. Why were these time points chosen? Also, the timeframes provided in the abstract is different to that provided in Table 1.

• Publication bias – the authors provide a range of databases which formed part of their search strategy. However, all these databases contain publications from journals mostly. Given this to be the case, how did the authors address the issue of publication bias? Did the authors search grey literature or other sources?

• Lack of appraisal of the included studies – I note that the authors ranked their included studies using a hierarchy of evidence for quantitative and qualitative research. The intent underpinning the use of hierarchy of evidence is to rank the study based on its research design and the level of bias (issues of rigour) associated with its research design. Despite doing this, the authors did not
undertake critical appraisal of the included studies (which is an important step in systematic reviews) and there is no justification for this. This is especially poignant as several times in the manuscript, the authors refer to the overall quality of the research found when in fact this was not completed assessed to begin with. Some explanation for this missing (important) process is required.

- Hierarchy of evidence – The authors state that they utilised the NHMRC hierarchy of evidence for this review. The NHMRC hierarchy of evidence has different hierarchies for different questions (intervention, diagnosis, prognosis, screening intervention, aetiology). I assume the authors used the intervention hierarchy of evidence. My concern with choosing this hierarchy of evidence for this review, is that this NHMRC hierarchy of evidence is ideally suited for clinical interventions (and not for interventions relating to support strategies for rural and remote health workforce). It is not surprising that most of studies occupied low levels within this hierarchy may be because it was inappropriate to use to begin with. In simple terms, my concern is “are we trying to fit a square peg in a round hole”). Also, how was mixed methods ranked in the hierarchy of evidence.

- Lack of criticality – While there are good summaries of individual research, categorised under various headings, the summaries lack a critical viewpoint. If the authors had undertaken a formal critical appraisal, then this may not be required. However, given that a formal critical appraisal was not conducted, it is important to summarise the results of the research using a critical focus. Unfortunately this seems to be missing.

- Conflicting statements – At the start of the discussion section, the manuscript reads that “……has identified key mechanisms that contribute to successful outcomes for staff, patients and services”. And yet in the latter part of the discussion section the manuscript reads “…..there is a lack of consistent, quantifiable evidence demonstrating the measured impact of supervision/support and/or mentoring interventions on other staff, patients and/or service outcomes”. While I think I get the gist of what the authors are referring to, on face value, these two statements seem conflicting. Amending these could ameliorate any confusion regarding the findings of this review.

**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:**

No. I am aware of the group of authors work and have communicated with them in the past. However, I do not see any competing interests.