Reviewer's report

Title: Improving the Use of Research Evidence in Guideline Development: 13. Adaptation, applicability and transferability

Version: 1 Date: 16 June 2006

Reviewer: John N Lavis

Reviewer's report:

General observations
The paper addresses an important issue and is both well reasoned and relatively well balanced. The authors do not address the particular challenges related to assessing the transferability and local applicability of policy guidance but instead treat all types of guidance in the same way. The paper is reasonably well written.

Major compulsory revisions
None

Minor essential revisions
1. The authors should ensure they consider whether their observations apply to all types of guidance, including policy guidance, or whether there are particular challenges associated with assessing the transferability and local applicability of policy guidance. The authors do not cite the paper by Gruen et al. in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization that provides criteria for assessing the transferability of systematic reviews or the paper by myself and colleagues in The Lancet that provides criteria for assessing the local applicability of systematic reviews. While the authors are focused on guidelines rather than systematic reviews, the papers by Gruen et al. and by us highlight some criteria that may also be germane to policy guidance.

2. The authors use the phrase “adaptation, applicability and transferability” in their title yet the authors touch only briefly on transferability (in the context of discussing whether WHO should identify and endorse high-quality guidelines that are widely transferable) and instead focus on how local efforts are needed to assess the local applicability of global recommendations and (if warranted) to adapt them locally (ideally with some support by WHO). The authors should consider changing the title to something like “assessing the local applicability of and adapting guidelines” and making clear that they are otherwise discussing transferability in only two ways: first, as a source of criteria for assessing local applicability, and second, in the context of the particular situation where WHO wishes to identify and endorse high-quality guidelines.

Discretionary revisions
3. The authors should address a number of minor wording and formatting issues:
   a. The authors use the adjectives “international” and “global” a great deal (sometimes as synonyms and other times in ways that suggest they may interpret the words differently) and sometimes in ways that are difficult to understand (e.g., is an “international scientist” someone who works for an international organization or participates in international meetings? Are “international users” a group outside the jurisdiction where the guideline was developed?). The authors may want to use the adjective “global” when referring to recommendations and avoid many if not all uses of the adjective “international.”
   b. The authors use the words “transferability” and “applicability” interchangeably. For example, in the abstract the authors say that “factors that influence the applicability of recommendations across different settings” whereas given their other use of words they more likely mean “transferability” here. And on page 4 the authors say that “guidelines are locally applicable or adaptable across settings” whereas given their other use of words they more likely mean “transferable across settings or adaptable.” Also, the authors sometimes use the word “generalizability” (e.g., on page 8) and don’t make clear whether they use the word as a synonym for “transferability.”
   c. In the abstract the authors provide a list of other types of information needed to make recommendations and it would help the reader if they always maintain the same ordering as in other papers -- “factors that may modify effectiveness in specific settings, need (prevalence and baseline risk or status), availability of resources, costs, and values” -- and as elsewhere in the text;
   d. In the abstract the authors refer to WHO’s role in providing local support for implementing
recommendations but they never return to this issue which, while critically important, seems beyond the scope of this paper (and hopefully the focus for another paper in the series);
e. on page 6 the one-sentence paragraph on HIV guidelines seems awkwardly placed;
f. on page 10 the authors refer to analyzing existing guidelines for guidelines yet the background section reads as if it includes the results of this undertaking (instead of being included in the Findings section);
g. on page 12 the authors introduce the acronym LMIC without having introduced it before;
h. on page 13 the authors provide a list of examples of ways that WHO could develop capacity but the list is ordered differently from the one provided in the abstract;
i. on page 13 the word guidelines appears to be missing after the phrase “WHO global HIV/AIDS”;
j. on page 14 the authors may want to drop the unnecessary phrase “help to ensure that this was done well, and help to address considerations or adaptation in new guidelines”;
k. on page 14 the authors introduce two approaches for identifying candidate guidelines for local adaptation but they separate the brief mention of each approach with a paragraph that doesn’t clearly pertain to either approach;
l. on page 14 the authors introduce figure 2 but I couldn’t find where they had introduced figure 1; and
m. on page 14 the authors mention involving consumers but not the policymakers and other stakeholders who may have much to say about policy guidance.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

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.