Reviewer's report

Title: Systematic Reviews: A Cross-Sectional Study of Location and Citation Counts

Version: 1 Date: 1 September 2003

Reviewer: Lisa A Bero

Reviewer's report:

1. Comments (Please number your comments and divide them into the following categories).

a) Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. It would be useful to define in the abstract what, for this paper, is meant by a "review article."

b) Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. The background section should note that it is difficult to find systematic reviews using electronic databases. There are some publications on this point.

2. The background section mentions how systematic reviews could be cited by clinicians, researchers and policy makers. However, this study assesses citations primarily be researchers.

3. In the background, a key reference or two pointing out the limitations of impact factors and citation rates should be cited.

4. The definitions of systematic and narrative reviews used in this paper should occur much earlier, such as at the start of the methods section.

c) Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. I would like to know more about how the database was constructed (Methods, para 1). Although journal yield, reviews of scientific merit, etc. were taken into account, it is not clear how they were taken into account.

2. Also, if all of the articles in the database "passed strict methodological criteria," these criteria should be listed. Were they different for different types of articles (RCTs vs. observational, or, more importantly for this study, systematic or non-systematic reviews)?

3. How were the cutoffs for the pass/fail methodological grades (methods, para 2) determined? Paragraph 4 of the methods section does not provide sufficient detail.

4. A meta-analysis (methods, para 2) should be defined as a review that quantitatively combined data from previous studies.

5. The authors define a requirement for 4 characteristics for a systematic review (methods, para 2). Were there any quality cutoffs for these characteristics? For example, if a review had a clear description of how the evidence was retrieved and from what sources, but this description said the
articles came for the reviewer's personal files (only), would this still be a systematic review?

6. The sample for analysis is skewed towards the five journals that publish the most systematic reviews. Therefore, the authors need to be careful to conclude that in journals that publish many systematic reviews, systematic reviews are more likely to be cited than narrative reviews. This sample cannot tell us whether, the general medical literature, systematic reviews are more likely to be cited than narrative reviews.

7. Quality of articles published in the journal is a potential confounder for the association of impact factor with systematic reviews. Perhaps journals that publish systematic reviews tend to publish articles of higher methodological quality; and quality is associated with impact factors. (see: Lee K., Schotland M., Bacchetti P., & Bero L. Association of journal quality indicators with methodological quality of clinical research articles. Journal of the American Medical Association, 2002; 287: 2805-2808.)

**Advice on publication:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Declaration of competing interests:**

None declared.