Reviewer’s report

Title: Reporting bias in medical research - a narrative review

Version: 1 Date: 20 January 2010

Reviewer: Norma Terrin

Reviewer’s report:

Reporting bias is a widespread problem with serious adverse effects for patients. This manuscript is a narrative review on reporting bias in the medical literature. If published, it would provide a valuable resource to the public and scientific community, as it brings together a large body of evidence of reporting bias in diverse medical fields. The compilation is astounding both in the number and potentially harmful consequences of biases revealed.

Minor essential revisions:

There are concerns regarding the comprehensiveness of the review. As the authors state, “the review was based on the screening of full-text publications on reporting bias that had either been obtained by the Institute in the context of its HTA reports and other research work or were identified by the screening of the reference lists of the on-site publications.” This procedure should be justified, or addressed as a limitation, or a comprehensive search should be undertaken.

There should be follow-up of the statement, “After the behaviour of Pfizer and Essex Pharma had been widely publicized, the companies provided the majority of study reports for the final HTA report, which will presumably be published at the end of 2009.”

The funnel plot is not a valid diagnostic for publication bias, because publication bias is not the only potential source of funnel plot asymmetry. The asymmetry of the funnel plot in the magnesium meta-analysis could be the result of heterogeneity, since standard treatment for MI (the comparison treatment in the trials) changed over the years. The paragraph on magnesium should be deleted.

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:

Non-financial competing interest: I have co-authored articles critical of the funnel plot.