Author's response to reviews

Title: Active ingredients are reported more often for pharmacologic than non-pharmacologic interventions: an illustrative review of reporting practices in titles and abstracts

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Illustrative review of reporting practices in titles and abstracts
Version 5. Cover letter

Dear Editor of Trials

Please find attached a revised manuscript entitled ‘Active ingredients are reported more often for pharmacologic than non-pharmacologic interventions: an illustrative review of reporting practices in titles and abstracts’. We thank the reviewer for reading our revised article and for commenting further. We have carefully considered and addressed each of the two comments below.

We look forward to your response in due course.

Yours faithfully,

Nicola McCleary

For the author group
Reviewer Comments

Minor Issues

1) Thank you very much for providing a graphical presentation of the results, this makes processing the information much easier. Would it be able to indicate differences between the two types of studies for each of the components in the graph (at the moment it looks like only the active ingredients differ significantly)

Only one significant difference is indicated in each of the two graphs because significant differences were investigated only for the ‘active ingredients’ component. This has now been clarified on the two graphs. We did not investigate significant differences between the two study types for all components for a number of reasons. First, investigation into reporting of active ingredients was our primary objective and so we have focussed primarily on this. Second, in some instances the low number of studies reporting certain components would have violated one of the assumptions of Chi-squared analyses (all cells having an expected count >=5). Finally, we felt that carrying out repeated Chi-squared tests on the data would have been excessive and would have greatly increased the likelihood of a Type 1 error.

2) In Box 2, the authors provide an example of codings that have been undertaken for the title “Treatment of childhood obesity by retraining eating behaviour: randomised controlled trial.”

Active ingredients are coded as absent from this title. However, it could be argued that the active ingredient in this title would be ‘retraining eating behaviour’. This would be in line with the codings provided in supplement 4, which often outline target behaviours for change (e.g. ‘exercise’) as the active ingredient. It seems as though the coding of an active ingredient is a matter of focus. A behavioural intervention might be described as targeting obesity through activity change in which case activity would be the active ingredient. The same intervention could however be described as targeting physical activity, in which case behaviour change techniques such as action planning and/or self-monitoring would be considered to be the active ingredients.

Please outline how a potential difference in coding of active ingredients depending on the level of study description has been taken into consideration during codings of active ingredients. This is particularly important when considering that data was coded by one author only.

Great point, thanks. In terms of the example used in Box 2, ‘retraining eating behaviour’ was coded as the intervention objective. This was because this intervention description reflects the intended outcome of the intervention, and does not fit our definition of active ingredients outlined in the introduction:
“The term ‘active ingredient’ refers to the components within an intervention that can be specifically linked to its effect on outcomes such that, if they were omitted, the intervention would be ineffective.”

Therefore, to be coded as an active ingredient, the intervention description must have specified the elements of the intervention which have the potential to influence the outcome, which ‘retraining eating behaviour’ (in our view) does not. The specific elements of this retraining would have had to have been reported for this title to have been classed as having reported the active ingredients. This is how the coding task was conceptualised.

This comment highlighted to us that coding of the active ingredients of non-pharmacologic interventions may be a matter of personal judgement, and so we decided that it would be appropriate to do some double-coding of our data in order to strengthen our findings. JF, blinded to the original coding, independently coded the active ingredients of all non-pharmacologic intervention titles, while NM re-coded these titles without reviewing the original coding. These two authors then discussed and agreed final coding.

As a result of this process, the coding of 21 titles (and the corresponding abstracts) was amended: we agreed that active ingredients were reported in 16 articles which had originally been coded as not containing active ingredients, and that active ingredients were not reported in 5 articles which had originally been coded as containing active ingredients. You will see that we have updated the methods section, our analyses, supplement 4, and the interpretation of our findings to reflect this. We would like to thank the reviewer for raising this issue as it has ultimately ensured that there is consistency between our definition of active ingredients and the resultant coding.