Reviewer's report

Title: Surgical trials and trial registers: A cross-sectional study of randomized controlled trials published in journals requiring trial registration in their author instructions

Version: 1 Date: 20 August 2013

Reviewer: Richard McGee

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions. The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached.

1. Please provide a list of the included trials in a supplementary file grouped by registration status.
2. Please provide a reason why surgical trials were not searched for in other locations e.g. medical journals.
3. Please comment on the likely impact of only including trials from high impact surgical journals.
4. Please clarify if there were any surgery journals you located which did not explicitly require trial registration and were thus excluded from your analysis.
5. I have major issues with how you defined a trial as ‘unregistered’. Your definition of an unregistered trial is one that could not be found through key word searching of the ICTRP. There are several issues with this: 1- This may reflect a poor search strategy. 2- The trial register used by a trial may not be included in the ICTRP. 3- You looked at the actual publication to see if registration was mentioned- so why not use this as well? 4- You say you used the ‘advanced search form’ on the ICTRP for a more “precise search” when really you should have been aiming for a sensitive search. These issues need to be resolved before the paper would be acceptable.
6. Your second study aim was to address whether “study results of the registered RCTs were publicly available”. You need to more clearly specify that you considered a journal publication or publishing of the raw data as ‘publicly available’. Clearly publication does not always equate to ‘freely’ available. It is not clear whether you considered trials registered in trial registers that are a) not publicly available or b) do not contain sections for publication links, as ‘submitted’ i.e. your second objective.

Minor Essential Revisions. The author can be trusted to make these.

1. Abstract- background: RCTs should be spelled out in full in the first instance before being abbreviated.
2. Abstract- methods paragraph: The authors state MEDLINE was searched but PubMed was actually searched – please correct.
3. Abstract- methods paragraph: Please clarify what ranking was used e.g. 'ranked journals by impact factor'.

4. Abstract- results paragraph: When starting a sentence with numbers please write in words i.e. Four-hundred and sixty.

5. Abstract- results paragraph: Please insert ‘A’ at the start of the third sentence.

6. Background- second paragraph- first sentence: ‘would allow’ who to track trials?

7. Background- third paragraph- first sentence: please insert a comma after ‘statement’.

8. Background- third paragraph: please clarify what is meant by “which is also claimed by the ICMJE”.

9. Background- sixth paragraph- please insert your usual paragraph spacing between the sixth paragraph and the final two paragraphs of the introduction.

10. Please change the phrase ‘sine qua non’ from the 5th paragraph of the discussion.

11. Results- paragraph 2: Please further explain what you mean when you say “study not concordant with the WHO definition of a clinical trial”. How was the trial different?

Discretionary Revisions
These are recommendations for improvement which the author can choose to ignore.

The paper is currently difficult to read because the focus is on the wrong areas. For example, there are eight paragraphs in the introduction covering almost two pages of text, while the discussion comes in at barely more than one page. The introduction could be made significantly shorter and the research questions more clearly highlighted. The discussion mentions plenty of relevant studies in the area, but frequently does not relate these studies back to the author’s results.

I’m not sure about calling your Figure 1 a PRISMA flowchart. The reason being PRISMA is designed for systematic reviews. This study is not a systematic review. It might be better to rename it a study flow diagram or something similar.

The tables are all rather inconsistently formatted. Please fix.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests