Reviewer's report

**Title:** Processes to Manage Analyses and Publications in a Phase 3 Multicenter Randomized Clinical Trial

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 27 January 2014

**Reviewer:** Sean Grant

Reviewer's report:

I have been asked to review the following manuscript for Trials: "Processes to Manage Analyses and Publications in a Phase 3 Multicenter Randomized Clinical Trial".

This manuscript describes the guidelines used to monitor the publication process of the Hepatitis C Antiviral Long-Term Treatment against Cirrhosis (HALT-C) Trial, from selection of topics to publication.

Overall, I found this manuscript to be very well-written and to introduce an important and useful tool for those running multi-centre trials. Given the increasing attention to publication biases and concerns about "time-to-publication" of trial results, I welcome the transparency of the author team in sharing guidance for organising publications on a highly collaborative project.

My comments mainly reflect my desire for more information about the processes of developing the guidelines, as I believe these details will help readers both appraise the guideline and will provide information for readers to develop publication guidelines for their own projects.

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

1. One major compulsory revision I request is that the authors provide a "limitations" section in the Discussion. It is imperative to achieve Trial's aim of a "well-balanced" Discussion for the authors to critically reflect on: (1) the guidelines they produced and how these guidelines were executed in practice, (2) the process by which they made the guidelines, and (3) the data presented in this paper (e.g., why only track Years 9-13 and thus 33 of the 74 studies?). These details would also help the readers better understand the difficulties in developing and executing publication guidelines, as the manuscript as it stands does not indicate whether difficulties were experienced and what these entailed.

2. In the "Results: HALT-C Publications" section, the authors state "The DCC tracked progress of manuscript proposals during the most active period of analysis and publications when more than two dozen proposals were planned (Study Years 9-13) (Figure 1)." It would be helpful if the authors could explain why they did not monitor manuscripts during other years of the study, as this selective tracking of a sub-set of publications (33 of 74 publications) could lead to
biased reporting of results of time-for-preparation and time-to-publication, which are the main data supporting the utility of these Publication Guidelines.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. In the "Methods: Publication Guidelines" section, I would like more details on how the guidelines were developed. While it is great have the final product and to know the project's processes for writing manuscripts, I would like to know how the Publication Guidelines were developed: who/how many were involved? How were the publication policies decided? What changes in policy happened between Years 1 and 2? Are there any other changes from Year 2 to Year 4 and then to Year 6 worth mentioning? What instigated these changes? Such details will help the readers better appraise these guidelines and how they were developed, should they be interested in using them or developing their own publication guidelines.

2. In the "Results: Publications Committee Actions: Writing Groups" section, how do you know the following: "Limiting each Writing Group to a nimble maximum of four investigators was a key factor in the efficiency of the Writing Groups." This should be substantiated by data (e.g., time to publication, interviews with authors) or marked as opinion of the authors of this manuscript.

3. In the "Results: Publications Committee Actions: Prioritization of Topics and Analyses" section, please indicate how the importance of each topic was decided: "Within each of the three categories, MCSs were further prioritized by consensus into high, medium, and low levels based on importance of the topic." Who/how many people were involved? What was the process?

4. In the "Results: Publications Committee Actions: Analysis and Writing Processes" section, please provide a few more details on how the list of study outcome definitions was developed: "Therefore, a list of approved study outcome definitions was developed with input from the DCC statisticians." Along with the DCC statisticians, by whom were they developed? How did this group make decisions? In the same section, where you state "As the study progressed, additional outcome definitions were added", please also describe why these were added, and what the process of adding them was.

The authors may want to consider developing a flow diagram that visualises the publication process, from proposing paper topics to their publication.

5. In the "Results: Publications Committee Actions: Authorship Attribution" section, the authors describe the ICMJE authorship guidelines as follows: "The ICMJE guidelines stipulate that authorship requires involvement in planning, analysis, or writing of the manuscript; contribution to concept, design, and analysis; and/or a role in drafting of the article and/or revising it critically for important intellectual content." This actually is not quite the ICMJE criteria. The authors here seem to have repeated the second criteria "drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content", without listing the third "final approval of the version to be published."
Here’s a direct quote of the criteria, which should be reflected in the manuscript accurately: "Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3."

Discretionary Revisions

1. In the Conclusion section of the abstract, I suggest that the final sentence read "multidisciplinary and multi-centre research programs." As many may judge whether to read this manuscript based on the abstract, I think it worth continually highlighting the usefulness of these guidelines to multi-centre trials.

2. In the Background, I found the following a tad overstated: "Peer-reviewed scientific publications—the primary modes of communication among scientists—are the measure of a clinical trial's contribution to science.". While peer-reviewed scientific publications certainly are one of the most important measures of a clinical trial's contribution to science, I wonder whether they are necessarily "the" measure of its contribution?

3. In the “Methods: Background” section, could you clarify how many sites there are? I read that there are 15: 10 CCs, 2 sub-sites, a repository, a virology lab, and DCC. Or are the sub-sites technically part of the CCs? I ask as there are only 13 reps from 13 independent sites on the Steering Committee, making unclear what these sub-sites are. Also, is the "NIDDK" rep on the 13-person Steering Committee referring to the repository? If yes, I'd change from "NIDDK" to "the repository" as this would be more clear. If not, would that be an additional site not being mentioned?

4. The acronym "MCS" should consistently stand for "Manuscript Concept Sheets" or "Manuscript Concept Sheet". Currently both "MCSs" and "MCS" are used to mean "Manuscript Concept Sheets".

5. In the Discussion, the authors state "(and the supporting abstracts and presentations prepared during their development)." Are there any estimates of the number of abstracts/presentations from this project? I think that these guidelines have use for conference presentations as well, so it would be interesting to have these data presented if available.

Potentially useful reference


6. The Conclusion could benefit from references on studies about publication biases and time-to-publication of trials, drawing attention to the problem of getting data from trials to the public, and therefore to the potential impact of well-organised publication strategies like the one discussed in this manuscript.
Potentially Useful References


Chalmers I and Glasziou P. Avoidable waste in the production and reporting of research evidence. Lancet 2009; 374: 86-89


**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:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.