Reviewer's report

Title: Characteristics of clinical trial websites: information distribution between ClinicalTrials.gov and 13 primary registries in the WHO registry network

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Reviewer: Lisa Askie

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1. Major Compulsory Revisions

Methods, paragraph 1: There is no description of how the ‘survey’ was developed or undertaken. The term ‘survey’ is usually used when researchers ask others for information. It is assumed that in this case the 14 registries were not actually surveyed, but rather the researchers themselves assessed / analysed the information on each of the registries by just accessing each website. Was there any correspondence with the administrators of any of the registries to clarify, supplement and/or verify the information extracted?

Results, paragraph 1: How did the researchers determine who and how many ‘users’ were appropriate? They have identified two potential users: patients and health professionals. This assumes that everyone who is not a patient is a professional, but there may be many different types of professionals, all with differing needs: clinicians, funders, journal editors, journalists, systematic reviewers, other researchers etc. If the premise is that this dichotomous categorisation of users is appropriate, the authors should at least allude to this in the Background section and provide a supporting reference.

Results, paragraph 3: Regarding “Four websites included “clinical trial” in the global navigation, five websites facilitated easy access to clinical trial information, and four websites had breadcrumb navigation features.”: this sentence contains terminology with which most readers of the journal would not be familiar and which has not been previously introduced in the manuscript. The authors should outline what is meant by ‘facilitated easy access to clinical trial information’. Does this mean there was a search facility in the website? Does it mean a record contained a specific link? The other italicised words above need further explanation for the reader.

Results, paragraph 6: Regarding: “Six websites attached an “Alt” attribute almost perfectly. “Image” was not used much on three websites. Seven websites created their layout using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), and eliminated the layout by using <table> tag”. The terminology used in these sentences would only be understandable to readers with a strong Information Technology background. General readers of the journal would not understand this language. These sentences need to be re-written to be understood by a general readership.

Discussion, paragraph 1: It is not clear how the study results as presented
support the claim that most of the websites surveyed were not easily accessible to the public. The authors have not defined what they believe ‘easy access’ constitutes, making it difficult to support this claim with the data presented.

Discussion, paragraph 2: Why is there reference to duplicate registration here? There is nothing in this study’s aims, data collection or results that contribute to the duplicate registration issue discussion. Where are the data that supports the statement that “there are only a few items that pertain to patients and the general population, who are asking for specific and prioritized information.”? People wanting more information regarding clinical trials would surely be interested in a trial’s inclusion/exclusion criteria, condition of interest and many of the other of the minimum 20 data items. Again, how do the data presented support such a statement? There are then comments about the need for website usage logs, user satisfaction and evaluation surveys. Again, as this study contains none of these type of data, it is difficult to see how these comments add to the discussion of the results presented.

Conclusion, paragraph 1: There is an overall assumption in this paper, that trial registry websites should be providing data that is in a format that is accessible / suitable for public consumption. As the authors did not actually survey (i.e. did not contact) the trial registries themselves to verify this, it may be a false assumption. Many registries take the position of being a national repository of trial activity, and then feed their data to consumer-friendly websites that are often disease and/or country specific, rather than themselves attempting to be both consumer- and professional-relevant simultaneously. Thus, by saying that “concerning the distribution of their information services to patients and the public, we discovered room for improvement in many organizations’ content and website systems”, the authors are assuming that each of these trial registries is intending to have a patient/public focus, which they may not. The conclusions should be tempered to reflect this limitation of the study.

2. Minor Essential Revisions

Background, paragraph 2: The first sentence needs re-phrasing as it is not grammatically correct.

Background, paragraph 3: The terminology “the current state of distribution regarding clinical research/trial information” suggests some sort of statistical distribution was calculated. As this was a descriptive study, this terminology sounds odd and thus might be improved with different wording.

3. Discretionary Revisions

Methods, paragraph 2: The term ‘distribution’ seems incorrect for the analyses done within this study. Perhaps a better term would be to ‘determine the pattern of …. ’?

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely
related research interests

**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 am the Manager of the Australian New Zealand Clinical Trial Registry and a member of the World Health Organization International Clinical Trials Registry Platform Advisory Committee.