Author’s response to reviews

Title: The updating of clinical practice guidelines: insights from an international survey

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Dr Denise O’Connor

The Implementation Science Editorial Team

Article title: The updating of clinical practice guidelines: insights from an international survey.

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Authors: Pablo Alonso-Coello., Laura Martínez García, José Miguel Carrasco Gimeno, I. Sola, Safia Qureshi and J. S. Burgers.


On behalf of the rest of co-authors I would like to thank you for your interest in our paper. Below please find our replies to your suggestions and comments regarding our manuscript.

Thank you for your consideration,

Dr. Alonso-Coello.
Response to Reviewer 1787418160412168

Comment 1: Qualitative data

Major Compulsory Revisions: More information is needed about the methods of analysis of the qualitative data, the amount of data which was received and the resulting themes and interpretation of this data. This is both essential to understanding this data, and would also substantially enrich the paper and increase its contribution to our understanding of the process, barriers and enablers of CPG updating.

General comment: Development of the survey is well described and appropriate. Methods for the quantitative aspects of the analysis are appropriately described. The methods of analysis of qualitative data are only described in a very limited way, which would not enable replication, and this substantially reduces the usefulness of this data.

General comment: While the Methods reports that the qualitative data were coded, the resulting themes are not presented or discussed. There is no reporting of how many respondents completed the open questions and the degree of similarity or variability within this data. It is not clear the extent to which the quotes presented reflect the overall sense from the qualitative data, or whether these were isolated sentiments. There is no synthesis or interpretation of the qualitative data presented.

Reply 1

The information presented in the boxes does not correspond to a qualitative analysis of the comments made by the responders. We apologize for the misunderstanding. We have deleted the sentence in the Results section “Answers to open questions were coded according to most common themes” as it can be misleading. We have, however, kept the most relevant comments as additional information in their corresponding boxes with modified titles.

Comment 2: Best practice

Major Compulsory Revisions: Justification is needed of how the survey identifies “best practice” rather than “current practice” in updating.
General comment: The authors state that they sought to identify “best practice” in updating, however while the results of the survey report current practice, the paper does not justify why this is “best practice”. Is the suggestion that the organizations surveyed are likely to be leading the way in rigour of updating? If so, perhaps this could be stated and supported.

Reply 2

In the Background section of the Abstract and in the Background section of the manuscript we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “We conducted an international survey to identify current practices in CPGs updating, and explored the need to standardize and improve the methods”, and “Within this context, we conducted an international survey with the aim of identifying current practices, to explore the need for standardization, and, ultimately, to improve the guideline updating process”.

Comment 3: Ethics approval

Minor Essential Revisions: Mention should be made of ethics approval if any, and reasons it was not sought if not.

General comment: Yes – except that there is no mention of ethics approval and a lack of detail about qualitative methods.

Reply 3

We did not request an ethics approval given the nature of the topic. We include a sentence in the Methods section to highlight this.

Comment 4

General comment: Yes, however I am not sure that the statement in the Conclusion of the Abstract “Guideline updating has been performed less rigorously than guideline development ‘de novo’” can be supported from this data, especially as there has been (and continues to be) substantial ‘de novo’ development of very low quality guidelines.
Reply 4

We agree completely with this comment and have deleted this sentence. The text now reads: “Our study is the first international survey about the process of updating CPGs among prominent guideline institutions across the world, providing a comprehensive picture of guideline updating. There is an urgent need to develop rigorous international standards for this process, and to minimise duplication of effort internationally.”

Comment 5

Minor Essential Revisions: In the Methods section of the Abstract the numbers of institutions surveyed (70 members of the Guidelines International Network who declared developing CPGs; 37 institutions included in the U.S. National Guideline Clearinghouse database that published more than 20 CPGs; and 7 institutions selected by an expert committee) do not add to the total number given (106). This should be explained.

Reply 5

In the Methods section of the Abstract we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “The survey was carried out between March and July 2009 and was sent by e-mail to 106 institutions: 69 members of the Guidelines International Network who declared developing CPGs; 30 institutions included in the U.S. National Guideline Clearinghouse database that published more than 20 CPGs; and 7 institutions selected by an expert committee.” We have also modified Figure 1.

Comment 6

Minor Essential Revisions: In the text of Results section, explanation should be given of why 8 of the original 114 institutions were not contacted.

Reply 6

In Figure 1 we have included this end note according to the suggestions of the reviewer: “e-mail not delivered (n=2), letter requesting e-mail not answered (n=3), lack of e-mail (n=3).” We also include this in the corresponding section that reads as follows: “The reasons for excluding these eight institutions were; e-mail not delivered (n=2), letter requesting e-mail not answered (n=3) and lack of e-mail (n=3).”
Comment 7

Minor Essential Revisions: The Results section of the Abstract states that 67 questionnaires were returned, however the main Results section states that replies were received from 44 institutions. This should be clarified.

Reply 7

In the Results section of the Abstract we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “Forty-four institutions answered the questionnaire (42% response rate). In the final analysis, 39 completed questionnaires were included.”

Comment 8

Minor Essential Revisions: It would be clearer to state in the text that 5 surveys were excluded because >20% of questions were unanswered (as per the figure) rather than that they were not “completed appropriately”.

Reply 8

In the Results section we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “In the final analysis, we included 39 questionnaires, as five were excluded because >20% of questions were not answered (Figure 1).” We have also modified Figure 1.

Comment 9

Minor Essential Revisions: On page 8 the authors state that “Twenty institutions (56%) ran the original search strategies and did additional horizon scanning, fourteen institutions (40%) used more specific strategies than the original strategies, and seven (20%) institutions ran other searches.” While the table helps understand this, explanation of how to interpret these figures, given they do not tally to 100%, would be useful.
Reply 9

In the Results section we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “The institutions used several search strategies. Twenty institutions (56%) ran the original search strategies and did additional horizon scanning, fourteen institutions (40%) used more specific strategies than the original strategies, and seven (20%) institutions ran other searches.”

Comment 10

Minor Essential Revisions: It would be useful to explain why the number of organizations included varies between 39 (tables 1 and 5) and 36 (tables 2, 3 & 4).

Reply 10

According to the suggestions of the reviewer, in Table 1 and Table 5 we have included and end note “Analysis of included institutions” and in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 we have included an end note “Analysis of institutions that update guidelines”.

Comment 11

Discretionary Revisions: It would be useful to have some discussion of whether any of the organizations made available the details of their updating processes.

Reply 11

In the second paragraph of the Discussion we have made a comment about this. The first sentence now reads: “Surprisingly, half of the organizations do not have a formal process to decide when a guideline becomes outdated, and only six provided some kind of document.”

Comment 12

Discretionary Revisions: It might be helpful for figure 2 and table 2 to be labeled “included organizations” or similar to highlight that these are those organizations whose data was included in the analysis, rather than all those surveyed.
Reply 12

According to the suggestions of the reviewer, in Table 1 and Table 5 we have included the end note “Analysis of included institutions” and in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 we have included the end note “Analysis of institutions that update guidelines”. We also have modified the title of Figure 2: “Included institutions (alphabetical classification by name of organization)”.

Response to Reviewer 1241688045417780

Comment 13

Discretionary revisions: Consider discussing the use of verifying responses by use of guideline manuals.

Reply 13

We appreciate this suggestion but have finally not verified the replies, given the small sample of guideline manuals available.

Response to Additional comments

Comment 14

Please clarify in the text how many people were sampled (sent a survey) per institution and how these individuals were selected.

Reply 14

We have included this text in the Methods section in order to clarify this issue raised by the reviewer: “An e-mail was sent to each institution through the address identified via the internet; if the person receiving this e-mail was not the person responsible for this matter, we requested that it be forwarded to whoever they considered appropriate to answer the survey.”

Comment 15

Please include the Fisher’s exact test results for analyses of responders and nonresponders (paragraph 1 under Results, pg 6).
Reply 15

In the Methods section we have modified the text. The text now reads: “We evaluated non-responding institutions and compared contact source (Guidelines International Network, National Guideline Clearinghouse or expert committee), country and number of CPGs produced with responding institutions using the Fisher’s exact test or Mann-Whitney U test (alpha was set at 0.05).”

In the Results section we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “Non-responding and excluded institutions (n=67) did not differ from the responding institutions with regard to the contact source (Guidelines International Network, National Guideline Clearinghouse or expert committee (Fisher’s exact test p=0.671), country of origin (Fisher’s exact test p=0.283) and the number of guidelines produced (Mann-Whitney U test p=0.07).”

Comment 16

The first sentence under 'Characteristics of the guideline updating process' (Results, pg 6) should say.... "....and the remaining 10 (28%) reported that they CHECKED FIVE OR LESS per year (Table 2)."

Reply 16

In the Results section we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “Sixteen institutions (44%) reported that they checked more than five guidelines for the need for updating annually, some institutions reported variable figures (n=10, 28%) and the remaining 10 (28%) reported that they checked five or less per year (Table 2).”

Comment 17

Please refer to the qualitative comments (boxes) throughout the text rather than just placing them in the results section.

Reply 17

We have done so accordingly.
Comment 18

Please use specific p values rather than p<0.05 (Results, pg 7).

Reply 18

In the Results section we have modified the text according to the suggestions of the reviewer. The text now reads: “Institutions that have been developing guidelines for more than ten years are more likely to have a formal updating procedure (Fisher's exact test $p=0.047$) and a rigorous process for guideline updating (Fisher's exact test $p=0.039$), than institutions developing guidelines for 10 or less years (Table 3).”

Additional modifications

Modification 1

We have eliminated the notation about Martínez García L, “Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Preventive Medicine Department, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain” and added in the acknowledgements “L Martínez García is a doctoral candidate in the Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Preventive Medicine Department, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain. Pablo Alonso-Coello is funded by a Miguel Servet research contract from the Instituto de Salud Carlos III (CP09/00137).”