Author's response to reviews

Title: Guidance for updating clinical practice guidelines: a systematic review of methodological handbooks.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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To the Editor
Implementation Science

On behalf of the rest of co-authors I would like to thank you for your interest in our paper. Below you will find how we have addressed the suggestions and comments of the reviewers regarding our manuscript:


We would be delighted to answer any possible questions you might have concerning the manuscript.

Yours sincerely,

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Referee 1: Mark Baker

All guideline developers eventually succumb to the burden of updating their portfolio. This underpins much of their process for reviewing and updating guidance and, especially, the threshold and process for updating. In essence, if working with fixed resources, the decision to update may well be influenced by the method of updating and its associated costs.

It would normally be appropriate for the methodology for updating to be as robust and thorough as the process for developing de novo guidance so integration of the processes is natural and wise. The authors, however, seem to regard this as a weakness as, typically, the described updating methodology is less comprehensive, referring frequently to the parent process.

At the root of the challenge is the extent to which the developer’s capacity can manage the simultaneous development of new guidance, review process and updating the portfolio. Some specialist developers with limited portfolios may be able to manage this but major national organisations, especially those which have been in operation for over a decade, will all be struggling.

The differentiation between the review process (which determines whether or not an update is required) and the development of the update itself is not always clearly delineated in the text of the paper. I do like the flowcharts which do emphasise the potential to utilise the review (early stages) of the process to develop the scope for the update and enable the update process to hit the road running. This certainly eases the path.

Reply: Thank you for your extensive feedback. We tried to differentiate the two stages across the manuscript of the assessment of the need for an update and the updating process itself. We humbly believe that this difference is clearly enough with figure 3. If you could point out where exactly this is not clear we would be happy to try to clarify further.

1. There is one irritating error on page 7 where 47.2% is described as ‘the majority’. Otherwise I found the paper interesting and constructive.

Reply: Thank you for spotting this mistake. We modified it accordingly.

2. It would also assist the authors in their main point if they could outline the content of what they think an update manual/handbook should contain.

Reply: Thank you for the comment. We think that in the discussion we have tried, implicitly and explicitly, to suggest some of the most important issues that need to be considered in an updating guidance.
Referee 2: Fiona Beyer

This is generally a well-written review, and although my expertise is in systematic reviewing methodology rather than guideline writing and maintenance, it seems to me important to know if and how published methodology is lacking or inconsistent.

1. English language: although the English is generally very good, there are a couple of place where it’s not quite right (e.g. in Identification of New Relevant Evidence section “Furthermore, two handbooks proposes the editorial board to have…”). Also commas and semi-colons are not quite right in several places.

Reply: We revised and edited the manuscript.

2. Table 1 is not referred to in the text.

Reply: Thank you for the suggestion. We modified the text accordingly.

3. Background: Suggest explicit objectives – it’s a clear background section which sets out the importance of updating guidelines, but it would be good to state at this point that you are both summarizing the current state of international methodological guidelines, and also critically appraising it based on your previous work.

Reply: Thanks for the suggestion. We clarified the objectives in the manuscript now:

“We conducted a systematic review to identify and describe the updating guidance provided by CPG methodological handbooks and included handbooks that provide updating guidance for CPGs.”

4. Methods: Data Extraction. Final 2 sentences of section are unclear: I don’t understand what is meant by “we considered a specific strategy”.

Reply: Thanks for the suggestion. We clarified this aspect in the manuscript:

“While extracting the data, we considered a strategy to be specific if the handbook included a detailed methodology, enabling the reader to conduct the suggested strategy. We considered a non-specific strategy if not enough methodological guidance is provided to facilitate an adequate approach.”

5. Results: Handbooks characteristics. Suggest reporting when handbooks were published, since it may be a reason for poorer updating content if they are older?

Reply: Thanks for the suggestion. We added the variable “date of publication” of the methodological handbooks in table 1.

6. Conclusions: Suggest the recommendations from the discussion section are summarised in the conclusions section.

Reply: We edited the conclusions in this fashion:
“Our work shows that updating guidance included in CPGs methodological handbooks is overall of poor quality. CPGs developers should provide more explicit and rigorous guidance and standardize the terminology used. This could, consequently, lead to a more optimal updating process of CPGs, and ultimately, to valid trustworthy guidelines.”

7. Acknowledgements: this has got mixed up with something else – would expect to see here the names of people who contributed to the work but are not authors.

Reply: Thanks for your suggestion. We included the information about the authors under the heading “Authors’ information”.

8. References: reference 8 has an incomplete title (should be “...monitoring and updating...”).

Reply: Thank you for your suggestion, reference modified.

9. Spacing hasn’t always worked in the references.

Reply: Thanks for your suggestion, references modified.

10. Figure 1: were there really no guidelines found in the NGC? Presumably this is after de-duplication (if so then specify).

Reply: Thanks for your suggestion. There was a mistake and we have corrected it.

11. Table of included handbooks: although tables 1 and 2 are useful, I think it would help the reader to see the handbooks listed with salient characteristics.

Reply: Originally we used to have a table with the handbooks listed with characteristics. However, due to the limitations concerning the amount of tables and figures, we decided to exclude it, because we believe the other tables and figures are more informative. If the reviewer feels strongly about this we could consider including it.

12. References: given that the paper is in English, it would be nice to see translated English titles of all the included handbooks.

Reply: Thanks for the suggestion. However, we respectfully disagree with this suggestion. The National Library of Medicine guidance on the report Citing Medicine: The NLM Style Guide for Authors, Editors, and Publishers [Internet]. 2nd edition [NBK7280], suggest including the original language of the technical report, with the option to include a translation of the title. For more details see www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK7280/#A38406 and www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK7280/#A38445)
Referee 3: Elena Parmelli

It could be helpful to had, if possible, a table that better summarise the findings of the review. It is difficult to follow all the description of the characteristics of the handbooks just reading the text.

Reply: Thank for your suggestion. However, we believe that Figure 1 and Table 1 and 2 are sufficient to understand the findings of the review. We would be happy to improve the tables further if the reviewer provides us with more specific suggestions.