Reviewer’s report

Title: Methods for the evaluation of hospital cooperation activities (Systematic review protocol)

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Reviewer: David Moher

Reviewer’s report:

Dr. Rotter and colleagues are proposing to conduct a systematic review in an interesting topic, namely, on the methods of evaluating hospital cooperation. Having now read the protocol a few times I’d like Dr. Rotter and colleagues to address the points described below. In summary I think the paper will benefit readers once several points have been clarified.

I note the protocol is not registered with PROSPERO (http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/; Booth A, Clarke M, Ghersi D, Moher D, Petticrew M, Stewart L. An international registry of systematic-review protocols. Lancet. July 13, 2010. Published online. DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(10)60903-8). Can the authors explicitly indicate this fact and provide a brief rationale – perhaps a sentence of two – as to why they have not registered the protocol with PROSPERO.

Is the systematic review funded? Please state the funding status explicitly.

The abstract needs additional details. Specifically, the Methods section – the authors have used a PICOS like approach in the body of the paper to help describe the eligibility criteria. Some of this information needs to be included in the abstract. Additionally, the authors need to include some information about the proposed quality assessment approach as well as the proposed synthesis methods.

In the background section the authors explicitly state their interest in examining “objectively reported methods of hospital cooperation”. The authors need to explicitly explain why they are excluding subjective measures – perhaps a sentence or two.

I think the definitions described on page 4 can be placed in a text box, thus helping to draw attention to the reader.

On the top of page 5 (beginning “We will search..” seems out of place. It should be moved to where the authors are describing their searching (page 7).

I have some trouble understanding parts of the section “Types of publications/studies”. The authors have concentrated their efforts on comparative studies, such as randomized trials and controlled clinical trials. Are these relevant studies to address the primary question of the proposed review, namely, “What are the reported methods for evaluating hospital cooperation activities”? I think readers will need a clearer understanding as to what type of study design will
address the primary and secondary question posed by the authors. Similarly, more clarity is needed as to what is meant by “reports” (middle of page 6).

Much of the information – bullets – contained in page 8 can be included in a text box. Again, some clarity is required (perhaps a more descriptive heading) about “other sources” (middle of page 8). Is this section about searching the grey literature? The second bullet in this section needs clarification – “Conducting reference lists of relevant papers and reviews” - do the authors mean “reviewing reference …..”?

Can the authors explicitly state whether they have (or will be having) their search strategies peer reviewed by colleagues – PRESS – (Sampson M, McGowan J, Cogo E, Grimshaw J, Moher D, Lefebvre C. An evidence-based practice guideline for the peer review of electronic search strategies. Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 2009;62: 944-952).

The NLM search (page 9 and 10) can be included as a table for an additional file when resubmitting.

The screening section (page 11) needs clarification. I think the second sentence (beginning “All titles and abstracts…..” should be placed at the start of the section. This is what happens prior to screening. Most readers won’t know what HB is. I recommend stating something like “......will be resolved by a third member of the research team (HB)”.

If the authors have a draft (page 11) or completed data extraction form(s) can these be submitted as an additional file with the resubmission.

The authors have included information on quality assessment within the data analysis section. This information needs to appear as a separate section and prior to the data analysis section. The authors indicate that the quality assessment will be completed using the EPOC approach. Can the authors provide a few details for interested readers – perhaps a couple of sentences.

I do not completely understand the data analysis section and more clarity would be helpful. The authors need to describe how they will synthesis the descriptive information they are collecting, such as their primary question – various methods for evaluating hospital cooperation activities. Only part of the proposed review will be amenable to their stated data analysis – “If possible, a summarized effect size....”. This will not be possible for the stated primary question. I think readers will be helped considerably if the authors can rearrange the data analysis section according to their primary question and outcome.

In the “combining studies” section (page 12) the authors need to provide more clarity. For example, the authors state “Studies will be grouped following the method reported and study design employed (low vs. High quality studies) in the primary study”. I think the authors have conflated (mixed-up) study design with quality. Additional clarifications of this section will help readers better understand how the authors are proposing to combine the studies.