Reviewer’s report

Title: Are Systematic Reviews Up-to-date at the Time of Publication?

Version: 1 Date: 18 February 2013

Reviewer: Chantelle Garritty

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MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

GENERAL:

1) Briefly, this article attempts to analyze how up to date systematic reviews are, based on their search dates and time to acceptance and publication. Authors have concluded that very few reviews state search dates in both the abstract and methods sections with most appearing in the later. A few other general characteristics are provided with regards to the number and names of the databases searched.

2) The overarching issue with this paper is that the authors don’t appear to address the three objectives stated, with the methods only assessing objective 3. This mismatch is confusing the reader and is carried over throughout the paper. In addition, further clarity of the methodology is required especially in relation to development of the sample of systematic reviews. Part of the confusion is that the authors fail to make the distinction between monitoring and/or formally assessing a systematic review as being possibly out of date that takes into account several signals beyond just the search dates and times to publication etc. Separate but related to this are the processes and methods for actually undertaking an update of an outdated review. What the authors appear to be most interested in are the ‘time from last search to acceptance and publication’ and then the concept of reporting quality of abstracts of systematic reviews (e.g., ensuring they include the sources searched and search dates).

3) To more fully understand the distinctions above, the following citations are recommended: (listed below)


4) In writing this article, if interested in ‘search dates’ and ‘abstract reporting’ it is important to make mention of the PRISMA statement thereby referencing what
the current reporting standards is for systematic reviews. The authors don’t provide enough of an argument for is why including ‘search dates’ in the abstract is more important over other information especially given word limits if in fact this is one of the key intents of the paper.

ABSTRACT:
5) The objectives of the paper are missing from the abstract – not clear what the purpose of the article is upon glancing the abstract
6) The methods section indicates this is a descriptive analyses but also fails to mention that the authors conducted a survival analyses therefore beyond descriptive

BACKGROUND:
7) This section should be better researched to reflect the paper’s intended objective (which is unclear to the reader at this stage).
8) Would suggest presenting the definition of systematic review the research team was working from (even though there is no consensus on a formal definition, one should be stated); would also include a definition of ‘update’ (Moher & Tsertosvadze, 2006); and if the focus of the paper is on survival – would have elaborated on the Shojania et al. (2007) paper to give broader context to the issue of outdated reviews
9) Also, there has been some work done previously in this realm that should have been reported (Systematic reviews can be produced and published faster. Authors: Margaret Sampson, Kaveh G. Shojania, Chantelle Garritty, Tanya Horsley, Mary Ocampo, David Moher. Journal of clinical epidemiology 1 June 2008 (volume 61 issue 6 Pages 531-536 DOI: 10.1016/j.jclinepi.2008.02.004)) – this should be cited in addition to which the authors should indicate how this research is novel from the Sampson paper.
10) To reiterate, the stated versus actual focus of the paper based on the objectives is unclear. However, given what was reported in the results section – again, reporting search dates and looking at times to acceptance and publication followed by reporting in abstracts is the focus of the methods and results section. Given limits, what does PRISMA indicate should be reported for each section including a structured abstract, and methods? What is the importance of reporting ‘search dates’ in abstracts?

OBJECTIVES:
11) Paragraph 1 – if the primary objective was to evaluate how up to date systematic reviews are at the time publication – the authors have missed the mark entirely by focusing solely on the search dates as this is just one of several possible signals for outdatedness. There are several other factors that should be taken into account when making this determination (e.g., are there quantitative and qualitative signals that would suggest the findings or conclusions are outdated?). Regardless, this objective was not addressed appropriately in this manuscript. If the authors intended to evaluate how up to date the ‘searches’ of the systematic review were at time of publication – then this should be clearly stated and should not be confused with assessing the overall update including its
findings as current. Nor should it be confused with reporting search dates in abstracts.

12) Even the secondary objective (determining how much time from search date to publication was caused by delays in submission and revisions in manuscripts, as compared with delays in publishing lead time) was not addressed appropriately in this manuscript. This would entail interviewing/surveying authors of systematic reviews for this information as well as journal editors in terms of their processes. Relying on reported search dates and publication dates, and database entry dates cannot address these issues.

13) The third objective appears to be more the focus of this paper (i.e., determining whether authors provide information on search dates and databases sources in the abstracts of systematic reviews).

14) Nonetheless, this section needs to be revised to more adequately to reflect what was actually conducted.

METHODS:

Paragraph 1

15) How did the authors arrive at the random sample 100 SRs indexed in Medline from each 2009-2011? This process is unclear. If simply going by Medline indexing terms, this should have been verified with eligibility criteria applied around a pre-determined definition of what constitutes a systematic review.

16) Was a formal Medline search strategy developed to identify the sample from which they drew the systematic reviews?

17) What was the size of the population the authors drew from?

18) Also, why was Core Clinical Journals filter chosen – a rationale should be provided. Why not just draw from all SRs indexed in Medline during those years?

19) More description around what types of systematic reviews were included would help to give context to what was included in the sample (e.g., were only reviews of interventions included or other were all types included? Across what fields? Etc.)

20) Was there any thought given to stratifying the identified reviews Cochrane versus non-Cochrane? Or systematic review produced by well established agencies (e.g., NICE, AHRQ EPC program etc.)

21) Overall, the methods outlined are not appropriate to address the primary or secondary objectives of the paper as they are currently stated. Methods seem to be geared towards the third objective but only an assumption based on the remainder of the present draft.

Paragraph 2:

22) Outcome measure 1 - does not address any of the three primary objectives as they are currently stated (possibly objective 3 - the issue of reporting search dates in the abstract);

23) Outcome measure 2 –using the last search date to date of acceptance and
publication as a proxy for delays – how have the authors defined ‘delay’? Be careful with this wording as ‘delay’ should be operationally defined and made explicit. Is this not instead just ‘time to acceptance’ or ‘time to publication’ as opposed to using terminology that could infer to readers - purposeful setback or interruption in the peer review process/journal submission process?

24) There is no formal outcome measure related to objective 3 as it’s currently stated (search date in abstract).

Paragraph 3: Data management and statistical analysis

25) ‘Survival analysis was conducted to determine……from search to acceptance’ – would it not have been prudent to capture ‘from last reported search’ as several systematic reviews run updated searches during the final phases of the review to ensure all relevant information has been captured so there are different search points during the conduct that need to be considered and accounted for.

26) How are multiple databases handled if they had different search dates?

27) There is no formal evaluation of the systematic review findings in this article (as per Objective 1) – mismatch of objectives and methods.

RESULTS:

Paragraph 2: Search date and databases stated in the abstract and full text

28) If no search dates and/or the data sources could not be identified – should these have been included as true systematic reviews in the sample? This raises the issue as to the validity of the sample.

Paragraph 3: Characteristics of databases in systematic reviews

29) Authors report six articles did not mention how many databases had been searched – if that is the case, should these have been classified these as true systematic reviews in the first place – again, this brings into question the validity of review sample if strictly going by Medline publication type tags.

30) Would have liked to see which journals published SRs the quickest;

31) Also, what types of journals were publishing these reviews? Traditional journals? Open-access etc.? One might expect that the later would publish quicker and this should be explored.

32) Again, how many were Cochrane vs. non-Cochrane; where were they published? Across what fields? What countries? – some general demographics to give context to the reviews.

33) Overall, found the results section thin in relation to objectives.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS:

BACKGROUND:

34) Paragraph 1 – reference #2 – would have used the Journal of Clin Epi co-publication as the reference here instead of the Cochrane Review.

35) Paragraph 2 – sentence 3 – ‘For users of review’ – add ‘s’

36) Paragraph 2 – insert ‘of’ between ‘publication of the review meant that…’
DISCUSSION:

Paragraph 1.

37) Would provide a reference for ‘since reviews can date rapidly’.

38) Not sure what message the authors are trying to convey to readers? Are they advocating reliance on information only provided in the abstract? Should messaging be that readers should be encouraged to read the full text? Perhaps somewhat inconsistent to scorn systematic reviews that don’t report search dates thoroughly in abstracts (if that is the overarching aim of the article) especially in light of PRISMA standards and word limits. Or, do changes in reporting need to be considered? Messaging of importance is unclear.

39) ‘this delay is important to users of reviews’ NOT reviewers

Paragraph 3.

40) ‘but Cochrane these was’….would rephrase to ‘but for Cochrane Reviews these were....’

41) Referencing mid-sentence is disruptive to the reader and should be at sentence end if possible.

Paragraph 5.

42) References need to be provided to substantiate the first sentence.

43) Would have been good to again draw in Sampson (2008) paper (Systematic reviews can be produced and published faster) and to relay findings to this for comparison where possible to demonstrate novelty of this work and how aligned the findings are.

CONCLUSIONS:

Paragraph 1.

44) ‘up-to-date review’ should be ‘reviews’

**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:**

No competing interests to report.