Reviewer's report

Title: Methods on the move: a critical reflection on two decades of "negotiating" Cochrane standards and protocols for producing qualitative evidence syntheses

Version: 1 Date: 9 July 2013

Reviewer: Esther Coren

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Major essential revisions

1. Overall this is a useful paper summarizing the history of QES and its relationship to the Cochrane Collaboration. I consider the greatest problem with it to be the tone of the challenges to the Cochrane Collaboration, and this needs adjustment throughout to remove the implication that the CC has either philosophical, political or strategic reasons for focus on SRs of effectiveness interventions, which I sincerely believe to not be the case. Similarly to QES, reviews of questions of diagnostic accuracy have recently been newly included in the work of the Cochrane Collaboration. It has never been suggested that there were political or philosophical reasons for their prior non inclusion.

Detailed points:

2. I have not encountered evidence that setting up the Cochrane Collaboration to focus on RCT evidence for effectiveness reviews was intentionally exclusionary of other epistemological paradigms, any more than setting up a dental surgery is intentionally exclusionary of podiatrists. This was a focus designed to ensure that the product/output had a clear brief which was to inform best practice in effective health care intervention and ensure knowledge was made available to summarise and support best evidence. As the paper rightly highlights, now that there is a need for evidence on other aspects of questions and also for more complex interventions and circumstances, other types of evidence are being included. It is arguable also that this is only possible due to the success of the initial focus of the Collaboration's work, which may have partly been due to the clearly focused brief. This paper should remove the inaccurate representation of the the Cochrane Collaboration's history and approach.

3. The section on context specific approaches to QES needs a bit more explanation. This is one of the key innovation areas proposed in the paper, but it has not been justified as to how a narrow context specific focus might assist the reader of a review within an evidence library with global reach. In fact, my understanding is that some of the current and ongoing work around complexity, equity and the public health group review agenda, actually advocates for more cross contextual interpretation and better understanding of the relationships between context and outcomes, which likely involves synthesis and analysis of data from across different contexts, in order to illuminate the meaning and applicability of findings. It is not clear how more context specific qualitative data
would help the collaboration to deliver its core business.

4. Reasons for non Cochrane authors of QES not presenting their work in the Cochrane library may be manifold. It is certainly possible that they perceive that work does not fit the CC purpose. It may also be that they do not see their main constituency as Cochrane and therefore its not 'on their radar’, among other reasons. I am also not convinced that for other than effectiveness questions, it would be particularly beneficial to have alot of reviews on non effectiveness or diagnostic test accuracy questions on the Cochrane Library.

5. Whilst I recognize the arguments across the poles of the Cochrane style question led approach as compared to the qualitative traditions of more iterative approaches, I do not see that this paper has fully made the case for Cochrane moving away from the question led approach which has characterized the last two decades of work. My understanding is that there are SR methodologists who favour the question led approach for SR questions regardless of the types of data to be included, as it is the answer to the core question that drives the purpose of the review. If this paper supports a move away from that and from the Revman based structure too, it would be helpful to see a clearer articulation of what benefit that would add, other than the cultural comfort of qualitative researchers.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

No to all other than a non financial competing interest as I am an active contributor to the Cochrane Collaboration.