Reviewer’s report

Title: Assessment of a method to detect signals for updating systematic reviews

Version: 1 Date: 21 November 2013

Reviewer: Rachel Marshall

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for inviting me to review this interesting paper on assessing the need to update systematic reviews. I have included my comments below.

Discretionary revisions

1. It is currently unclear from the abstract and methods section whether the surveillance method has previously been published. If previously published I suggest adding the reference in the first paragraph of the methods section, and if not published adding a statement to this effect.

2. It would be helpful to know in the methods section how many specialty journals were permitted for the surveillance searches. It would also be interesting to know what proportion of the studies in the full updates were identified in the surveillance searches.

3. The surveillance method is described in detail and the work involved is considerable. However, the paper does not report how long the surveillance method takes, and how this compares with time taken to complete a full update. Future research might consider whether the surveillance method identifies enough reviews that don’t need to be updated, in order to make the surveillance worthwhile on behalf of the funders. Additionally it would be interesting for the authors to comment on how duplication of effort in the surveillance method and the update could be avoided. What ‘work’ from the surveillance method could contribute to the update (for example, using some of the screening results), and what work is solely for the purpose of the surveillance method and would not contribute directly to an update (for example selecting a list of specialty journals for the surveillance searches)?

4. If this method is confirmed to identify low and high-priority reviews for updating in a cost-effective way, it leaves open the question of how frequently surveillance assessments might need to be performed, or how low-priority reviews for updating might be classified or flagged so that readers know they can be confident in the conclusions. Perhaps the authors might consider commenting on these issues.

5. I suggest adding a reference to the Cochrane fit for purpose project in the background section of the paper, which developed a tool for updating systematic reviews based on the retrospective analysis of 72 updated Cochrane Reviews (http://www.editorial-unit.cochrane.org/sites/editorial-unit.cochrane.org/files/uploads/10_4000_01%20Fit%20for%20purpose%20-%20centralised%20updating%20support%20for%20high%20priority%20Cochrane%20Reviews%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf)

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am currently employed by The Cochrane Library as an Editor, and have been involved in research around when to update systematic reviews.