Author’s response to reviews

Title: The judgement of biases included in the category “other bias” in Cochrane systematic reviews of interventions: a systematic survey

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Response to Review

Dear Editor,

thank you very much for providing us the second revision of our manuscript number BMRM-D-18-00215R1, titled: The judgement of biases included in the category “other bias” in Cochrane systematic reviews of interventions: cross-sectional study. We appreciate the editorial and peer-reviewer’s effort. Hereby we provide a point-by-point response to the comments we received.

Technical Comments:

- Please include list of abbreviations

Response: List of abbreviations was already included in the previous revision of the manuscript, on the page after the end of the Discussion, and before Declarations.

Reviewer reports:
Juan J Yepes-Nuñez, MD, MSc, PhD(c) (Reviewer 2):

Thank you for taking your time to read and address all my comments/suggestion. You developed a great job, and I hope this work will give new additional orientations about to address RoB issues in systematic reviews.

Response: We are grateful to the reviewer for the kind words about our manuscript.

One last suggestion: it would be good if in the title you change "cross-sectional study" for "systematic survey".

Response: We changed the title as suggested.

Thanks and all the best,

Juan

Reviewer 2 (Reviewer 3): REVISION ASSESSMENT FROM THE ACADEMIC PEER REVIEWER:

Has the author addressed your concerns sufficiently for you to now recommend the work as a technically sound contribution? No

Reviewer comments: It's clear from the authors' comprehensive answers to the first two reviewers comments that considerable time has been spent on revising the draft but unfortunately I don't think my comments have been heeded by the authors in this revised manuscript and I now have further concerns about the reporting of this study as is discussed in the final paragraph.

Response: We have done our best to revise the manuscript according to the reviewers’ suggestions. Based on some comments of the reviewer, it appears that some of the revisions were not sufficient as the reviewer expected more elaborate revisions, which was not clear to us from the initial comments. Furthermore, one of the comments that the reviewer is very critical about refers to the tone of the manuscript. However, our results will stay the same regardless of the tone. Tone of the manuscript will not change the fact that we are criticizing Cochrane authors’ treatment of the other bias domain. We conducted this study for the very reason that we noticed that described errors were very frequent, and we decided to quantify it.

Previous point 2. In this comment I have asked the authors to make it clear what types of bias would not be covered by the new version of the v2 RoB tool due to the omission of "other bias". The point of this request is to elaborate some of the types of bias that have been identified by the
present study thereby strengthening the importance of the study by highlighting (even a few examples of, if not exhaustively listing) what, from this study, Cochrane authors had previously been recording as "other" which will not be accounted for when people use the updated RoB tool. The authors have not amended the manuscript to accommodate this request and therefore this limits the impact and recommendations of the study. Therefore I request again that, following line 378 of page 18, the authors list at least some of the types of bias that have been found by the current study which may not be covered by the new RoB tool.

Response: We have already used some examples, based on this comment of the reviewer, but due to this comment, we have added more examples. The new paragraph says:

However, there are still potential biases from other sources that the RoB 2.0 may neglect by omitting the RoB domain for other bias. Relevant other bias that were identified in our study include, for example, problems with inclusion and exclusion criteria, data analyses, outcome domains and outcome measures that were used, usage of co-interventions that are not accounted for, deviations from the protocol, study design, issues related to specific types of trials such as cross-over trials and biases specific to other to certain topics. Therefore, we believe that there is a rationale for including ‘other bias’ domain in revised RoB tool too.

Previous point 3. That's great that some published works can now be cited to support the current work.

Response: We are glad that the reviewer is pleased with this part of revision.

Previous point 4. The authors have misread my comment. I asked the authors to be more "emphatic" and the authors have mistakenly interpreted this as "empathetic". By "emphatic", I wished the authors to be more bold and courageous in highlighting the weaknesses of Cochrane reviews found from this study, because Cochrane reviews are widely upheld as the gold-standard in evidence syntheses. As the authors have instead opted to make the manuscript "less harsh and more neutral" they have done the opposite of what this comment has requested. It was my intention to highlight that people should not be afraid to criticize Cochrane reviews and indeed it is preposterous of the Cochrane Collaboration to think that they can censor such criticisms. As such, the authors changes in response to this comment have weakened their message and by being optimistic the manuscript will fail to urge the necessary caution required to ensure researchers pay attention.

Response: We have indeed mistaken emphatic with empathetic. Therefore, we reverted revisions that we have done based on this previous comment. However, we would like to emphasize that our study by its nature is a criticism of the Cochrane Collaboration. Being more or less diplomatic will not take away from its main message that the Cochrane authors made numerous mistakes in the ‘other bias’ domain. We are now explicitly critical of the Cochrane reviews in both conclusions – in Abstract and in the end of the manuscript.
Previous point 5. Thanks, that's a great help.

Response: We are glad that the reviewer is pleased with this part of revision.

Previous point 6. I appreciate that the authors have sought help in revising the English in the latest manuscript, and I know it's not easy an easy task, but there are still frequent grammatical/language errors which it make it harder to read. For example, where it is written "In this study, we aimed to determine types and judgments of 'other bias' domain in the RoB tool in Cochrane reviews of interventions."

This should be written more like "In this study, we aimed to determine the types of bias and their corresponding judgements noted in the 'other bias' domain by review authors who used the RoB tool in Cochrane reviews of interventions.

Response: The manuscript was revised, as suggested.

Previous point 7. So, if all records screened were also verified by a second reviewer, this would amount to independent screening by two authors. I would like to know the outcome/agreement (e.g. kappa?) of this exercise, which is necessarily time consuming and, when I see such good practice, I am always interested in research teams that decide to use such methodology. I realise that this is a blinded peer review but I think that the initials of the two authors who declare that they independently screened all the records should be added to the manuscript at this point (and of course redacted for peer review purposes) in the spirit of research integrity and transparency according to systematic review principles. This is particularly relevant as the authors previously stated in response to Reviewer 2 that screening was not done in duplicate. This issue requires clarification and rather suggests some dishonesty in this amendment to the manuscript.

Response: Records were screened by LP and verified by AB during analyses. This was now clarified in the manuscript. We did not have any disagreements. We do not consider this to be screening by two independent authors because in that case two authors would do screening independently and then compare results of the screening. In this case, screening was already conducted, and decisions were verified by another author.

I was very supportive of this manuscript but the failure to properly consider my suggestions and the red flag in research conduct regarding reporting of screening is very disappointing.

Response: We did our best to address comments of the reviewer and we are sorry for potential misunderstanding on our or reviewer’s side.

Sincerely,

Livia Puljak and co-authors