Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 0 Date: 24 Oct 2018

Reviewer: Reviewer 2

Reviewer’s report:

PEER REVIEWER ASSESSMENTS:

OBJECTIVE - Full research articles: is there a clear objective that addresses a testable research question(s) (brief or other article types: is there a clear objective)?

Yes - there is a clear objective

DESIGN - Is the current approach (including controls and analysis protocols) appropriate for the objective?

Yes - the approach is appropriate

EXECUTION - Are the experiments and analyses performed with technical rigor to allow confidence in the results?

Not sure - key details are missing from the manuscript

INTERPRETATION - Is the current interpretation/discussion of the results reasonable and not overstated?

No - there are minor issues

OVERALL MANUSCRIPT POTENTIAL - Could an appropriately REVISED version of this work represent a technically sound contribution?

Yes - current version is technically sound

PEER REVIEWER COMMENTS:
GENERAL COMMENTS: This is a very important study in the field of systematic review because it highlights that Cochrane reviews, regarded as the gold standard of systematic review products, are being conducted and produced inconsistently and without proper attention to the handbook. To be an author of a Cochrane review is a prestigious role and therefore beneficial to the reputation and career of those authors. However, conversely they are frequently unfunded projects conducted by authors in their own time and as such likely to be a burden on authors who have many other work responsibilities.

The benefits of tool or checklist like RoB is that is ensures consistency of attention to given criteria to all studies. The drawbacks is that it can discourage review authors to think for themselves or to look further into areas where the tool does not adequately describe bias encountered from included studies. In this sense it can be overly prescriptive and can allow the exercise to be undertaken autonomously and too rapidly.

All too often the process of quality assessment is ignored, barely described by authors and overlooked by readers, but it should be a hallmark of systematic reviews.

This review highlights that when Cochrane review authors have the opportunity to assess and describe "other bias" this is frequently performed incorrectly with authors failing to clarify whether no other bias was found or, if it was, what the other bias was specifically.

I find learning about the various types of "other bias" reported by authors very interesting. The authors rightly highlight that version 2 of the Cochrane RoB will not have the "other bias" and in lines 327-329 highlight that some areas found would not fall under the more extensive updated RoB tool. I would like the authors to go further here in elaborating the judgements of "other bias" found from this review that would not be covered by the new 2.0 tool. This is important for those working in this area who need to understand the limitation of new tools which are hoped to be improved versions of the old ones.

The authors allude to a similar study on attrition bias which is unpublished. Ideally this would be published, or at least in press, in order to be cited here.

REQUESTED REVISIONS:

The overall interpretation could be more emphatic. Recently Cochrane has been under the spotlight for seeming to censor, by way of expulsion, board members who criticize Cochrane reviews. In this sense, the idea that these products will continue to be churned out without due consideration from authors is worrying to those with research integrity. How should the Cochrane Collaboration respond to the findings from this study?

ADDITIONAL REQUESTS/SUGGESTIONS:

I have a problem with the acronym CSR because as a systematic reviewer this invariably means to me a clinical study report but here it applies to the Cochrane Reviews. I think many other
readers in the field of this paper are likely to have the same association and I would prefer the acronym here to be CR.

Some minor English/grammatical errors such as: "only RoB of RCTs was analysed" (should be plural)

Please clarify what proportion of titles/abstracts were verified by the second author

Note: This reviewer report can be downloaded - see attached pdf file.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

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