Reviewer's report

Title: Towards greater understanding of implementation during systematic reviews of complex healthcare interventions: the Framework for Implementation Transferability Applicability Reporting (FITAR)

Version: 2 Date: 01 Feb 2019

Reviewer: Susan L. Norris

Reviewer's report:

Major comments

1. The manuscript has improved in response to reviewer comments: the concepts are clearer and the writing more precise.

2. As you point out in the introduction, the term "applicability" is always in reference to a specific context. Yet in the 7 elements listed and in the complete tool in the appendix, there is no reference to what that context is and/or how it is determined. As a systematic reviewer, one might have a specific context in mind, defined by the PICOC question - or in the case of a global guideline, one might want to extract the data to determine what the body of evidence indicates and how it might be relevant to a variety of contexts. Thus, when using the tool, what is the reference point with which to assess applicability? In the discussion (page 20), you conclude that you have a framework for supporting the analysis and reporting of applicability. Yet you have not achieved that: you have simply provided a framework or list of considerations that might be relevant to a determination of relevance/applicability to a specific context. You have not told the reader how to analyze or report "applicability" which is itself a judgement.

3. I remain unclear as to the purpose of this tool. It may well be helpful in reporting primary studies, guiding searching, involving stakeholders, data extraction, etc. as the authors point out in the discussion. But what does one really do with this tool? It is for use at the individual study level, but what is needed is a synthesis of applicability to the systematic reviewers' or decision-makers' context of interest, ACROSS studies. There is no discussion of this in the paper. We have such a plethora of tools that we really need to strongly justify yet another one. This 44-item tool seems to be a tool in search of a purpose.

4. Each of the 7 elements in FiTAR is a question: e.g. "how do the findings apply to different… patients..."? This is followed by a series of questions that elicit information on patient characteristics. But there is another step between gathering these characteristics and drawing conclusions about how the findings apply to different
populations. This is not addressed in the paper either at the individual study level, or, more importantly, across studies in a systematic review.

5. The 7th of the main elements (box page 8) refers to "initiatives". What are these? Elsewhere you use the term "intervention": is this what you mean?

6. The discussion of each of the individual items varies in content and usefulness. It still reads more like a laundry list the details of which relate to a review that the reader has to identify separately in order to truly make the descriptions meaningful. It does not really work as a stand-alone description.

Minor comments

1. Page 3, abstract: The first sentence in the methods section ("in this paper we focus on…") seems better placed in the introduction as it is not a description of methods. Similarly, in the methods section on page 5, the first paragraph "we intended…” is not methods.

2. The reference to GRADE (#12) is from 2004 - there are much more recent and better papers to cite.

3. The scope of the literature is unclear (page 5). What were you looking for? How did you decide is a review was relevant or included?

4. Page 6, line 21. The first sentence of this paragraph is not well connected to the second. And the second sentence starts with "this paper", which might refer to the systematic review mentioned in the prior sentence, which is confusing.

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

Yes

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

Unable to assess

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

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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I am a member of the GRADE working group. I have worked with Dr Booth on a project in the last 3 years. No other relevant conflicts of interest to declare.

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