Reviewer’s report

Title: Systematic review searches must be systematic, comprehensive, and transparent: A critique of Perman et al

Version: 0 Date: 28 May 2018

Reviewer: Trish Greenhalgh

Reviewer's report:

This is a critique of a previously published review article. It makes an extremely good point and raises questions about why the original paper was accepted in its incomplete form (did the reviewers of that paper not pick up that something was missing?). The discussion about the over-rigid search strategy missing some really key papers is an important lesson and very well worth pointing out.

However I think there are three things needed before this response is publishable.

1. The title is dull and fails to capture the key point of the paper. I would try to use a 'declarative title' i.e. one that captures what the paper is actually about. Something like (for example) "Over-sensitive search strategies can lead to unsystematic systematic reviews: A critique of xxx et al"

2. The abstract is also dull. Needs completely redrafting to say in an elevator pitch what this paper is about and why it matters. In attempting to be polite it's over-reached and become obsequious! I suggest toning down the acknowledgement (but keep it in). Maybe make the abstract more obviously focused on the methodological point: (see my suggested title).

3. It seems to me that there is an additional point that is worth making - over-reliance on ANY electronic search strategy is not an especially sensible or rigorous approach. Many years ago I published a paper in the BMJ (Greenhalgh and Peacock 2005) called 'Effectiveness and efficiency of search strategies...'. In it, we argued (from empirical evidence) that the MOST EFFICIENT search strategies were 'asking around' (among people with knowledge of the field), and that most of the really good hits came not from the systematic search strategy but from citation chaining (searching references of references and using forward-search databases such as Google Scholar). That was in 2005! In 2018 we should NOT be accepting anything as a "systematic review" if the authors have not doing some kind of citation-chaining AND asked at least a sample of experts in the field what key papers they recommend.
These are all easily remediable deficiencies in the paper. I'm happy to see a revision.

Trish Greenhalgh

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

Needs some language corrections before being published

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No competing interests.

The authors (who I don't know) approached me a few weeks ago to tell me that BMC Public Health had rejected their paper because they couldn't find reviewers. I gave general advice and said that since this was (broadly) in my field, I'd be happy to be named as a potential reviewer.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

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