Reviewer’s report

Title: When a parent dies - a systematic review of the effects of support programs for parentally bereaved children and their caregivers

Version: 0 Date: 08 Mar 2017

Reviewer: Bridget Candy

Reviewer's report:

The authors have provided a potentially informative systematic review. However there are a lot of limitations in their text which reduce the clarity and impact this work could have.

My recommendations are for them to follow more closely accepted methods for high quality systematic reviews. Such as using the PRISMA guidelines. It may also help to take advice from a colleague familiar with undertaking systematic reviews of trialled interventions and also someone who is a native English speaker as some of the sentences are a little 'clumsy' (such as (page 7) 'it is most common that the parents died die to illness' - a clear way to express this would be 'Commonly parents died because of an illness').

Finer comments on MS are:

ABSTRACT:

In methods section - state first your inclusion criteria. Then where you searched included dates to searched to. Do not have results in this section

In results section - provide a statement on number that were trials and provide a statement on quality of trials. Aim to give some statistical evidence of these positive results you present.

MAIN TEXT:

In methods section - Put the first and second search in the same sentence. What are 'Central' search terms? It is usual to put the inclusion criteria first and then state where you searched. Also why did you search beyond RCTs? You found sufficient RCTs not to warrant extending this and your conclusions to weaker designed studies. Moreover, your message would be clearer and more robust. Why did you chose that particular grading system to assess quality, why did you not use the Cochrane approach? Please be more specific on what you mean by excluding small studies, how small is small, n = 5 or n = 50 ??
Analysis section in methods

Why did you not consider a meta-analysis of the RCTs, this method is what if possible systematic reviews of interventions aim for. They give a more precise estimate of the effect of trials of sufficient similarity? Presentation is not standard, again they would be wise to consult a systematic reviewer or a statistician. Some of the statistics and presentations are not usually advised by statisticians, such as Yates correction (see Haviland, Mark G. "Yates's correction for continuity and the analysis of 2× 2 contingency tables." Statistics in medicine 9.4 (1990): 363-3670. Also it is not usual to calculate the statistical power, as an ad hoc calculation after analyses. Another issue is in providing sig as ns, *, ** statistician prefer actual values.

Results sections

Please move section on study design to below your first two paragraphs in results. In the section on included studies first sentence, the second paragraph this would be better placed in the methods section than results.

Please add a separate section on quality assessment and reconsider use of Cochrane system.

Please relabel section 'key results of the included interventions' to 'effectiveness of interventions'. This makes it more precise for the reader. I don't understand why you have lumped together all the results from the trials with the weaker designed studies. I would present the results separately. Could any of these results be combined across RCTs?

DISCUSSION

I think they need to rewrite the discussion to make it clearer for the reader. The sections I would like to see are those seen in Cochrane systematic reviews:

1- What the review set out to do.

2- A summary of the key findings

3- Overall completeness and applicability of evidence
4- Quality of the evidence

5- Potential bias in the review process

6- Agreements and disagreements with other studies or reviews

7- Implications for practice

8- Implications for research

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.

Unable to assess

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

Unable to assess

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.

I recommend additional statistical review

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published
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