Reviewer’s report

Title: Comparative effectiveness research: what to do when experts disagree about risks

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Reviewer: Nathan Emmerich

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This is an interesting essay that attempts to consider the way in which we should assess the risks presented by research into 'comparative effectives.' There is, I think, significant merit to the substantive analysis. However, given that the paper offers a number of thought on how we should evaluate expert opinion there should be some reference to the work of Collins and Evans in this area. Their analysis includes reference to expertise per se as well as meta-expertise (the judgement of the expertise of other's). As the perspective presented here advocates mediating - rather than deciding - between experts it is not something that can be simply applied. Nevertheless, it might be fruitful to consider this work and if it has anything to offer.

Second, this paper continues the now well-established tradition of arrogating the responsibilities of scientists to the ethics committee. Lest we forget, such committees are not meant to present researchers with the ethics of their proposed research but with reviewing the ethical dimension of the research they propose. This paper's argument regards the ethics of comparative research. Why, then, is it addressed to ethical review committees (ERCs) rather than those conducting comparative research? Certainly, it might interest ERCs that find themselves reviewing such research but surely its primary audience are those conducting (which is to say designing and proposing) such research? These are, after all, the individuals and groups who bear the primary responsibility for the ethics of such research. They are the individuals who ought to assess the range of expert opinions at play in the topics they are researching. This is something that holds true for their scientific importance as well as, in the light of this paper, their relevance for a proper assessment of the risks the proposed research presents to participants.

Against this, one might take the view that those conducting comparative effectiveness research are not disinterested analysts but experts in the topic at hand. Given that comparative effectiveness research focuses on topics where there is disagreement among the relevant experts this papers supressed premise seems to be that researchers working in this field are likely to be partisans in such debates. However, even if this is the case it seems they are able to design research that tests the difference of opinion in this area. This being the case they should also be able to reflect upon the ethical dimension of research design in a bipartisan manner. Responsibility for this should not be assumed by - or pushed upon - ERCs.

It seems that this is a case whether ethics, scientific knowledge and methodology are deeply entangled. It may be, then, that the risk assessment of comparative effectiveness research is so complex that it requires specialist analysis if the ethical aspects of the research it to be properly understood. There may then be a case to be made regarding the need of researchers to include
ethical / risk assessment expertise at an early stage in the research process. It is misguided to think that this need ought to be met by ERCs.

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?
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Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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Yes

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