Author’s response to reviews

Title: Qualitative Evidence Synthesis for Guidelines: Paper 2 Using Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Findings to Inform Evidence-to-Decision Frameworks and Recommendations

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Response to comments

Reviewer 1

Reviewer comment 1: Thank you for the opportunity of reviewing the paper entitled: "Qualitative Evidence Synthesis for Guidelines: Paper 2 Using Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Findings to Inform Evidence-to-Decision Frameworks and Recommendations". This paper is the second of a series describing the use of qualitative evidence synthesis in the development of clinical and health system guidelines. The aim of this paper is "to describe and discuss how findings from QES can be used to populate key Evidence to Decision (EtD) framework criteria for decision making in guideline development and to inform recommendations". Examining the acceptability, feasibility and equity of the recommendation guidelines while creating the EtD frameworks is highly valuable. The description of the steps adopted in developing the proposed approach was very transparent and relevant. The examples used to describe the process of populating EtD framework with findings from QES were clear.

Assessing the confidence in the findings using the GRADE CERQual approach is a strength.
Author response: Thank you for these comments.

Reviewer comment 2: Minor edits are needed but otherwise publishable as is.

Author response: No other edits were specified in the material received from the journal.

Reviewer 2

Reviewer comment 3: I would like to commend the authors on a highly interesting, clear and well written paper. It promises to be a valuable resource in the field. I do have some queries around their methodology of bringing together their knowledge and expertise in this field. These are listed below. I hope the authors find these helpful.

Author response Thank you

Reviewer comment 4: Page 5, Line 28: Interested in the expertise of group during initial reflection stage. What does each author bring to the paper?

Author response: We have now added the following text to page 5: “The team included people with extensive experience in qualitative research and qualitative evidence synthesis methods, methods for guideline development and the use of evidence-to-decision frameworks.”

Reviewer comment 5: How did you record, bring together and analyse these reflections? Was this the formal use of the Delphi method? Did you audio-tape and conduct thematic analysis or use an alternative qualitative analysis technique/process? What was the process for identifying the three areas for focus in the synthesis of each of three papers and how were the themes/ideas/recommendations within this paper generated?

Author response: We did not use formal qualitative methods, such as recording and analysing transcripts, or a Delphi approach for this process. As described on pages 5 and 6 of the paper, the core author team met for four days to discuss and reflect on our experiences of using qualitative evidence in guideline development processes, and the feedback that we had received informally from others. During this meeting, we kept notes of these reflections and, based on these notes and further discussion, identified the three key areas that each became a focus for one of the papers in the series. Through further discussion, we then developed an outline for each paper. Members of the team then wrote drafts of sections of the papers and shared these drafts for further reflection and discussion during the meeting. This process was repeated several times
during the meeting. The writing continued after the meeting, supporting by a number of teleconferences of the team.

Reviewer comment 6: Page 5, Line 58: What amendments were made on the basis of their feedback? (Could be recorded in a supplementary table)

Author response: Thank you for this suggestion. We do not think it would help readers to include the comments and suggestions made by the stakeholders who provided feedback on drafts of the papers. These comments and suggestions were addressed as far as possible as the papers evolved, taking into account the scope of each paper and the word limits agreed in advance with the journal.

Reviewer comment 7: Page 6, Line 7: Does this list of WHO guidelines in which the authors have been involved exhaustive, or merely represent a sample? If the latter, how were these examples selected?

Author response: This is a complete list of all of the WHO guidelines in which the authors have been involved and which used evidence from qualitative evidence syntheses. At present, not all WHO guidelines include qualitative evidence.

Reviewer comment 8: Page 7: How was the information in Table 2 generated?

Author response: The information in Table 2 was developed as part of the writing process for this series of papers. The methods for this are described on pages 5 and 6 of the paper.

Reviewer comment 9: Pages 9, Lines 32 to Page 10, Line 10. Have you considered an analysis of the content of example EtD guidelines to support the recommendations made here? This would be a useful addition.

Author response: Thank you for this suggestion. It is not feasible to attempt this at this stage of the process as the writing work for this series of papers is now largely completed. Also, we do not believe that this approach would add value here as the principles (rather than recommendations) that we outline for creating a narrative for each framework criterion are based on our experience of undertaking the process; some well accepted and widely used approaches within both qualitative research and evidence-informed health care (such ensuring traceability back to the individual findings that informed the narrative); and other literature (for example, the papers we cite on the helpfulness of a graded entry approach).
Reviewer comment 10: Page 6, Line 4-24/33: I wonder if these paragraphs could be incorporated into the list of the research process described above on page 5? This broad overall step-by-step process description could then be linked to detailed specifics within results section.

Author response: All of these points are part of the methods section of the paper which is approximately 1.5 pages long. We tried incorporating the list of guidelines on page 6 within the bulleted description of the methods on pages 5-6 but found that the resulting bulleted description was too long and clumsy. We have therefore opted to leave the text as it is.

We are not sure what the reviewer means by ‘This broad overall step-by-step process description could then be linked to detailed specifics within results section’. We have therefore not made any further edits in response.

Reviewer comment 11: Page 6, Line 27: Were all health systems from high-income countries, or across low, middle, high income countries?

Author response: All of the WHO guidelines from which we selected examples are intended to provide global recommendations relevant to health systems in low, middle and high income countries.

Reviewer comment 12: Page 7, Line 15: What do you mean by "simple" searches? i.e. abbreviated search strategy, time limited e.t.c.? How extensive do these searches need to be in order for the team to decide if further syntheses are required?

Author response: Thanks for the useful comment. To address these points we have added the additional text in blue below to the paper:

“Undertaking simple searches for relevant syntheses early in the guideline process may help the technical team decide whether it is necessary to commission new syntheses. For example, the technical team could search a database of systematic reviews in health, such as Epistemonikos (www.epistemonikos.org), for a limited time period, for instance the last five years. A judgement on whether new syntheses need to be commissioned could then be made based on the syntheses identified (if any), including their scope, the synthesis approaches used and when the syntheses were conducted.”

Reviewer comment 13: Page 14, Line 35: Could this be a further rationale for analysis of the guidelines themselves to see how this has previously been done?
Author response: Yes, and we note later in the same paragraph that “Further research is needed in these areas”.

Reviewer comment 14: Page 16: Discussion section needs to acknowledge the potential limitations of the approach used by the authors within this piece of work and the possible impact of these on their recommendations.

Author response: We have added the following paragraph describing some of the limitations of our approach to the discussion section, page 15:

“This paper is based on our experience of using QES findings within WHO guideline development. In drawing out the lessons we have learnt, we have tried to ensure that these could be applied across a wide range of health guidelines. The approaches we describe may also be useful for decision making processes in other sectors that aim to utilise qualitative evidence. However, we acknowledge that our experiences are limited to the WHO context and the range of guidelines in which we have been involved, and also to the EtD framework approach. As we note below, further work is needed to explore the application of the learnings described in this paper to guidelines in other areas. Further research on how qualitative evidence is understood and used within decision making processes may also lead to insights that enhance and extend the guidance outlined in this paper.”

We would also like to note that this paper does not make recommendations. Rather we “describe and discuss how findings from QES can be used to populate key EtD framework criteria for decision making in guideline development and to inform recommendations” in these guidelines.

All revisions to the paper have been marked as tracked changes in the revised submission.