Reviewer’s report

Title: The effect of antenatal education in small classes on obstetric and psycho-social outcomes - a systematic review

Version: 1 Date: 14 September 2014

Reviewer: Caroline Homer

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper. The objective of this systematic review is to assess the effects of antenatal education in small groups on obstetric as well as psycho-social outcomes. This is not really a systematic review (as usually these include a meta analysis) – it is more a review of the evidence undertaken in a systematic way.

The authors acknowledge that a review was conducted in 2007 but state that since then more randomized trials have been conducted. It would be useful at this point to have identified which trails have been conducted since the last review.

The objective was: to determine the effectiveness of antenatal education in small classes on obstetric and psycho-social outcomes compared to no intervention, treatment as usual or other types of educational programs using randomized trials from Western countries.

Why were only ‘western’ countries included?

Were quasi randomised trials included? Were all the interventions face to face?

There are 4 primary outcomes on pages 5-6 but these are very broad and actually include many more outcomes. Were more specific outcomes determined? For example, what forms of pain relief (was it epidural anaesthesia vs everything else or any form versus nothing?). Which obstetric interventions were included (induction, augmentation, episiotomy, caesarean section etc?). What were the measures of psychological and social adjustment to parenthood (and this seems like more than one outcome)? Antenatal and postnatal depression and anxiety seems like 4 outcomes not one? The secondary outcomes are also very broad and encompass multiple elements. I would have thought clarity about the outcomes would have been helpful.

The authors seem to have included all the trials regardless of risk of bias analysis?

I was surprised to see trials about group antenatal care included? These trials (eg. Ickovics et al) are not really about education per se – they also provide full antenatal care.

I was surprised that a meta analysis could not be performed. I would have thought it would have been more useful to be much clearer about the inclusion
and exclusion criteria to ensure that there were some similarities of intervention and then do a meta analysis.

Supplementary file 6 presents the RR and 95% CI. This file includes multiple analyses for what seems to be the same outcome (e.g., Epidural analgesia). Why was a meta analysis not performed on these outcomes? Presenting the data in this way is not very helpful as it is only really a summary of the different studies but does not seem to move the evidence along at all.

The authors state that they “assessed the literature up to 2014 and the results from the trials conducted in the interim period have not altered the conclusion from the earlier review of a largely unknown effect. Also, we have included earlier trials not reported in the systematic review conducted by Gagnon and Sandall – these did not change conclusions.” Given there is no meta analysis presented I am not sure how they can say this?

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am part of a group currently updating the previous systematic review on antenatal education (Gagnon AJ, Sandall J: Individual or group antenatal education for childbirth or parenthood, or both. Cochrane database of systematic reviews (Online) 2007:CD002869). Therefore I have a conflict of interest.