Author's response to reviews

Title: Time to rethink the systematic review catechism? Moving from "what works" to "what happens"

Authors:

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Response to reviewers: Time to rethink the systematic review catechism?
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Reviewer 1:

Essential revisions

1. Sandelowski reference. Yes the reviewer is quite correct – I have changed this sentence and added the reference.

2. The typos on page 6 have now been amended.


Discretionary revisions

“Although broad reviews can be useful…”
Thanks for the opportunity to clarify this. I am not advocating simply broad reviews, or broad questions, but reviews which move away from testing narrowly-focused hypotheses about effectiveness – whether interventions “work” or not. In many cases these are very appropriate, but in many cases they are not, and yet remain common. I have reworded this section and added it to hopefully clarify this. I also added a new paragraph pointing out the limitations of seeing change in complex systems as solely a “what works” question.

“For review questions where there is...difficult to achieve saturation where there is little research evidence”.
Thanks, this is true, I have added this to the text.

“I have similar concerns...advocating reviews with no focus”
“Broader” here does not mean “less focused”. The broader question I give an example of in the text is “What has happened previously when this intervention been implemented across a range of contexts, populations and subpopulations, and how have those effects come about?” – this is still a focused question – it is just not focused on a narrow ‘what works’ question. I have added this wording to the text to clarify this.

“I am not convinced that this is a new challenge…”
I think it is, but I haven’t expressed it clearly – the argument is not just about the need to include qualitative studies in systematic reviews – which is unarguable and indeed not new - but about the possibility that qualitative evidence can tell us about impacts (not just about mechanisms, processes, acceptability). I have reworded this.

Referee 2: Jennie Popay
There are two (significant) suggested revisions:

Failure to make the target explicit – and make clearer the connections between the 6 parts.
I think this is probably right and if I was to identify the target it would not be Cochrane reviews as such, as many reviewers there (e.g. in EPOC and the Public Health Review Group, and other Groups) have moved away from simple effect size reviews. The target is the large
majority of reviewers (and also funders) inside and outside Cochrane who have adopted the apparent systematic review methodology without much critical reflection - but the paper does need to acknowledge that a significant body of reviewers have already moved away. I have now done this. But equally a lot of the more methodologically flexible reviewers - who do reviews of qualitative studies for example – still replicate the core parts of the systematic review process – e.g. the exhaustive search – even when it may not make sense.

I have reworded the discussion to emphasise this and have added more discussion of the need to move away from “what works”. I also changed the title of the paper - to remove the mention of “challenges” - and to highlight the move away from “what works” – thanks for helping clarify this focus of the paper. (if it has) This is really what the paper is supposed to be about and the challenges are a simple vehicle for this. I have therefore added a new section in the Discussion emphasising the need to move away from hypothesis testing towards a more Bayesian perspective.

Reviewer 3
1. Thanks – I have added some additional text on this.  
2. Thanks – I have extended the commentary on this, in the Discussion  
3. Thanks, I had forgotten about this spat between Iain Chalmers and Martyn Hammersly and have reread these papers, but on reflection have decided not to cite them. Hammersly in his paper does also discuss non-comprehensive searching, but that is in the case of reviews to develop theory, so I have not discussed this further.

I think the suggested goal of bringing together debate and development across all these areas is probably too much for this paper, though worth attempting (perhaps in a different paper) – but I have cited the Popay report, and Dixon-Woods reports though as these are clearly relevant, and Trish Greenhalgh’s work, and also the Rameses reporting standards, to point up the previous work, as suggested, and as suggested by another reviewer.

Minor revisions  
1. Yes, agreed – I have mentioned funders now.
2. I have expanded this, in response to Reviewer 1, so hopefully this addresses this comment. I have also added more in the Discussion on systems perspectives.
3. Thanks, I have reworded and slightly shortened this section, to hopefully clarify the meaning.