Reviewer’s report

Title: Producing Cochrane Systematic Reviews - a qualitative study of current approaches and opportunities for innovation and improvement

Version: 0 Date: 04 Jan 2017

Reviewer: Cathy Brennan

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this manuscript. The topic is of importance as high quality reviews are key to informing policy and practice yet the production of such reviews is not unproblematic. This paper reports on a study that explored experiences of the review process with a view to providing recommendations to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the process within the Cochrane model.

The authors state that the study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods yet the results only give the qualitative results in the form of themes from the interview responses. The authors suggest that interview data was initially analysed separately but combined with the survey data as the similarity of the themes became apparent. It is not really clear what the authors mean here or how the results from the survey allowed for the development of themes. Whilst it is not unusual for open ended questions in surveys to provide qualitative data, it would help if the authors were clearer regarding the nature of the survey data - for example how many and what questions were open ended and how many of the survey respondents actually provided free text responses? The authors state that the survey data was to be analysed using simple descriptive statistics which suggests that the main part of the survey data was fixed response categories, no descriptive statistics were provided so it is unclear where the mix of qualitative and quantitative methods is in this manuscript. I would suggest that this manuscript could be strengthened by focusing solely on the interview study and reporting those results only. If the authors keep reference to the survey data then they need to provide much more detail as to what this data looks like and how it contributes to the thematic analysis.

It is difficult to make comment on the rigour of the qualitative methods as there is little detail of this in the methods section. I recognise that word constraints are an issue but it would be helpful to give some indication of for example: the key areas/questions in the interview schedule (how different are these to the themes uncovered; were the interviews recorded and transcribed (the authors make reference to interview notes yet use participant quotes); were any quality checks of the analysis undertaken (for example checking of codes/themes by more than one researcher); did the authors use any particular approach to the thematic analysis.
In the reporting of the themes it was sometimes unclear if some sections came from the interview responses or were just general information provided by the authors from their knowledge of the Cochrane process. For example lines 164 to 171.

I think it would help in the conclusions if the authors drew out the key learning for the production of all reviews and those that are limited to the Cochrane model.

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An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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