Author’s response to reviews

Title: Reviewer training to assess knowledge translation in funding applications is long overdue

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Reviewer #2

Thank you for your comments on our manuscript. The level of detail you provided has greatly assisted our revisions and we hope, resulted in a clearer and more cogent article.

As you have commented, clinicians are indeed a very important category of knowledge or research users. Clinicians and clinician researchers can often make the bridge between basic science and eventual clinical application, for example. The revised article includes more mentions of clinicians as an audience for research uptake.

Your concerns re flow and clarity are well taken. The manuscript has been restructured, condensed and section headings revised resulting we trust, in a more coherent flow.

Responding to your comment on discussions with colleagues (line 98 in the original manuscript), the language has been changed from colleagues (which is accurate if not descriptive) to key informants and the number, nine, has been specified. Although this may seem like a small sample, it is in fact a large tranche of the KT experts in health research in Canada.

Your comment that Line 117 in the original manuscript might be seen as a hypothesis (or part of it). In the revisions, rather than characterizing the purpose of the manuscript as an argument, it is now described more accurately as a proposed approach. We hope this clarifies the purpose. The premise of the manuscript is that KT is an increasingly important factor in the grant approval process but peer reviewers are poorly placed and often poorly supported to review KT plans with any depth of understanding. Guidelines help but if we want a high degree of rigour, we propose that training or education is necessary.

The overview of the literature has been revised to address your comment on the reference that is situated in the UK. Additionally, ‘our take’ is more accurately referred to as experiential knowledge that the authors bring to this issue.
Reflecting on your comments regarding the Recommendations, we decided that this section and the one preceding it were indeed somewhat difficult to follow and have consolidated them into one section and titled that section as Discussion which we think more accurately reflects the contents and the intent. The discussion section content is grounded on a composite of the three sources of knowledge we used - research-based, experiential, and key informant and we hope the restructuring and revisions make this more apparent. Some of our suggestions are indeed ambitious and remain to be tested for feasibility.

The question of the best way to approach training/education are ones we intend to explore in our funding agency. The only direction we could glean from the review of evidence and the key informant interviews was that education should be cognizant of existing skill levels, be delivered just in time, and in that regard, possibly offered at the beginning of the panel meeting.

We agree with your comment that individual peer reviewers are not experts across the range (Line 101) and do not need to be. In fact, and hopefully stated more clearly in the revised manuscript, our point is that those areas of expertise rarely include knowledge translation.

Regarding your more specific comments:

• “Education” has been added alongside the word “training”.

Dear Reviewer #3

Thank you for your comments on our paper. In addressing the issues you have raised, we believe has resulted in a better quality publication.

We do believe that all research should be translated, but in an appropriate way and assuming that the research was properly conducted. One study could change the world but more likely, as you have pointed out, it would add to a body of knowledge. As a rule, a single study should never be presented without a reference to the body of knowledge on that subject. The knowledge translation plan should reflect that and what might be appropriate for a single study would be to disseminate the research results to other researchers in the field, to make the research results available for use in systematic reviews, and/or make data available in a shared repository.

Engagement of knowledge users is referenced in your comments as well and we whole heartedly agree that engagement is a good thing particularly in applied health services research but also can have a place in basic research. Integrated knowledge translation entails a thoughtful approach to who should be engaged, in what roles and at what stages in the research.

The strategies and activities employed in a knowledge translation plan will indeed rest heavily on good communication skills. Some have argued (Barwick, et al 2014) that knowledge translation uses a broader set of communication tools to accomplish their goals than those commonly used in the field of communications. Additionally, skills in such areas as knowledge synthesis, stakeholder engagement, and team building, among others, may also need to be employed in the
knowledge translation plan. As you have pointed out, it may be that the researcher will not have any or all of the skills necessary or at the level of competence required. In such cases, the knowledge translation plan would reflect that and show that the researcher intends to reach out to find these resources.

Funders have become much more prescriptive in recent years in the guidelines for knowledge translation. This is critical as the criteria will, as you have noted, guide the applicants in developing their KT plan as well as the reviewers in conducting their assessments. Our contention is that although critical, guidelines are often not sufficient for reviewers who are not versed in knowledge translation. It is usual, for example, to tell reviewers that the knowledge translation plans should be reasonable, appropriate and feasible but without further guidance, it is often difficult for reviewers to know what that translates into (no pun intended) in order to differentiate between a good KT plan and a poor KT plan. With training that includes examples, as you have suggested, reviewers will more readily be able to calibrate the knowledge translation plans in the applications before them.

We hope that with the restructuring and revisions we have undertaken in response to reviewer comments that we have a much stronger article on what we feel is an important issue in peer review. Thank you again for your thoughtful comments.