

Peer Review

Review of: "How Many Papers Are Published Each Week Reporting on Trials of Interventions Involving Behavioural Aspects of Health?"

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This paper provides a timely and policy-relevant bibliometric estimate of the scale of published trials addressing behavioural aspects of health. The central finding—approximately 5,500 behavioural trials per year (≈ 106 per week)—effectively illustrates the magnitude of the evidence synthesis challenge. The study succeeds in framing this as a structural problem for cumulative science and provides a compelling argument for automation and structured reporting (e.g., via the Paper Authoring Tool and machine-readable outputs).

Strengths

Clear and reproducible search strategy.

Transparent acknowledgment of limitations.

Pragmatic adjustment for scope through manual inspection.

Valuable translation of publication volume into estimated workforce and cost implications.

Strong linkage to broader initiatives (Human Behaviour-Change Project, ontologies, NLP extraction).

Methodological Considerations

Sampling for scope adjustment

The use of the most recent 100 papers to estimate the in-scope proportion may introduce temporal bias (e.g., recent publication trends differing from earlier years). A stratified random sample across years would improve robustness.

Search term specificity and sensitivity

The reliance on selected behaviour terms likely underestimates scope (as acknowledged), but may also overrepresent high-volume areas (e.g., smoking, diet). A formal sensitivity analysis comparing MeSH-only vs free-text searches would strengthen validity.

Trials filter ambiguity

PubMed's "clinical trial" filter may not consistently capture behavioural trials, particularly cluster RCTs or quasi-experimental designs. Clarification of filter performance characteristics would be useful.

Duplicate counting and multi-report trials

While acknowledged, the potential inflation from multiple publications per trial is not estimated. Even a rough correction factor would refine conclusions.

Costing assumptions

The projection of 20 person-hours per paper is reasonable but speculative. Presenting a sensitivity range (e.g., 10–30 hours) would enhance the credibility of the economic estimates.

Conceptual Contribution

The strongest contribution lies not in the exact numeric estimate, but in quantifying the infeasibility of fully manual synthesis under current reporting conventions. The argument for structured reporting and machine-readable outputs is persuasive and aligns with broader movements in open science and research standardization.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.