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# BMJ Open

## Protocol for a Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership to agree the most important unanswered questions in international burns care.

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**Title Page****Title: Protocol for a Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership to agree the most important unanswered questions in international burns care.**

H. Richards<sup>1,2</sup>, R. Staruch<sup>3</sup>, A. King<sup>1,2</sup>, C. Pugh, S. Kinsella<sup>4</sup>, J. Savović<sup>5,6</sup>, A.E. Young<sup>1,7</sup>

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Surgical Research, Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, England

<sup>2</sup>NIHR Bristol Biomedical Research Centre, University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation and the University of Bristol, England

<sup>3</sup>Botnar Research Centre, Department of Engineering Science, University of Oxford, Oxford, England

<sup>4</sup>The James Lind Alliance, National Institute for Health Research, School of Healthcare Enterprise and Innovation, University of Southampton, Alpha House, Enterprise Road, Southampton, England.

<sup>5</sup>Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, England

<sup>6</sup>National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration West at University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust, Bristol, England

<sup>7</sup>Children's Burns Research Centre Bristol Royal Hospital for Children, Bristol, England

**Corresponding author:**

Mrs. Hollie Richards  
Bristol Medical School: Population Health Sciences  
University of Bristol  
39 Whatley Road  
Bristol, BS8 2PS  
United Kingdom  
Email: hollie.richards@bristol.ac.uk, Tel: (00 44)117 928 7283

**Abstract:***Introduction:*

Burns affect 11 million people globally and can result in long-term disability with substantial associated healthcare costs. There is limited research funding to support trials to provide evidence for clinical decision-making. Research prioritisation ensures that research focuses on the topics most important to stakeholders, addressing issues of research waste and evidence gaps. The aim of this project is to agree the global top ten research priorities important to international patients, carers and clinicians from all income status countries.

*Methods and analysis:*

The Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership will use James Lind Alliance methods to establish the top ten research priorities in global burns care. An initial international online multilingual survey will collect candidate research priorities from stakeholders. To increase equity in participation, the survey will also be available via the social media app WhatsApp. Additionally, interviews will be conducted. Data will be analysed to identify and collate research questions and to verify that the priorities are true clinical uncertainties. This list will then be ranked by stakeholders in order of importance via a second online survey. Finally, a consensus meeting will identify the top ten research priorities, which will be disseminated to funders, governments and researchers.

*Ethics and dissemination:*

The University of Bristol Medical School Faculty Ethical Committee has approved this project. Research into burn care should be prioritised to ensure that funding is focused where most needed. This should be undertaken internationally, to ensure inclusion of the views of professionals and patients from lower income countries, where the incidence of thermal burns is highest. The project will be designed to ensure that accessibility to the surveys and final consensus meeting is maximised. The involvement of the James Lind Alliance will ensure the methodology is robust, the audit trail is complete and the patient voice is heard.

**Keywords:** Research prioritisation; burn injuries; scalds; thermal injury; research methodology; research waste

**Abbreviations:** PSP: Prioritisation Setting Partnership; LMIC: Low- and middle-income countries;

### Strengths and limitations:

- We will use a standardised and proven methodology. The James Lind Alliance have undertaken research prioritisation exercises in more than 100 healthcare areas.
- We have established a Steering Group of international stakeholders and a wide network of clinical collaborators representing all income status countries.
- The online surveys will be available in eight languages and can also be completed using WhatsApp.
- Language, literacy levels and access to the internet may be barriers to survey access by low-income country participants. We will trial methods to address this limitation with international collaborators.

### Introduction

Burns injuries affect 11 million people globally and 140,000 people in England every year(1). Injuries can result in long-lasting functional and psychosocial disability(2). Healthcare costs are substantial, and are related to long hospital admissions, multiple surgeries, and the need for rehabilitation(3). Despite the importance to healthcare expenditure, quality of patient life and outcomes, there is a discrepancy between treatment burden and the volume of high-quality evidence in burn care(4, 5). There is thus no consensus on the best approach to current and new treatments(4), and subsequently a wide disparity in care exists between burn services within the UK and globally(6, 7). This lack of evidence matters, because single-question RCTs are costly and there is a scarcity of funding available for multiple trials(8, 9). Evidence to fill clinical knowledge gaps are also not specifically addressed and potential improvements to patient care are missed, as studies do not focus on research areas that are important to patients and clinicians (10, 11).

Research prioritisation ensures that research focusses on questions that are of the most potential benefit to improving outcomes(12). This decreases research waste and ensures the most effective use of scarce research funding(13). The process involves identifying and prioritising unmet research needs that are important to all relevant stakeholders(14). A standardised methodology for research priority setting is provided by the James Lind Alliance (JLA), (15) which is a non-profit initiative established in 2004 and supported by the UK National Institute of Health Research. The JLA places patients, caregivers and clinicians as central stakeholders(14, 16), bringing them together into Priority Setting Partnerships (PSP). These Partnerships aim to identify the top ten most important unanswered questions and research uncertainties(16). The process is comprised of three phases: 1) the formation of a Steering Group; 2) identifying, verifying, refining and prioritising research uncertainties from stakeholders via systematic reviews, surveys and interviews and 3) final agreement through a consensus meeting to agree the top ten research priorities.

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Priority setting exercises are most commonly undertaken within one country(16). However, burn injuries occur disproportionately in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with 70% of all burns occurring in these areas(17-19). Not only is the incidence higher in these regions, but access to specialist burn care is limited by geographical and economic constraints(19). To address this, the research priority setting exercise for burn care will have a global remit to ensure that the views of patients and clinicians from LMICs are represented.

Focusing research questions on those issues of highest priority to stakeholders will direct future trials to address current evidence gaps. It will reduce research waste(20) and will provide important new knowledge for researchers, funders and governments. The aim of this project is to work with the James Lind Alliance to identify the global top ten research priorities most important to international patients, carers and clinicians.

## Methods and Analysis

### 1. Steering Group.

The Global Burns Research priority setting partnership (PSP) will be led and managed by an international Steering Group which has been set-up to support the development of this protocol. Guidance on the development and selection of a steering group for research prioritisation exercises is limited. In this project, the aim was to select a steering group that provided expert international multidisciplinary professional experience (e.g. surgeons, intensivists, therapists and nursing staff) and those with lived experience of burn care. This was achieved through purposeful selection of individuals via burn professional organisations and patient/survivors through burn support groups and charities. To reflect the global scope of the project, Steering Group members have been purposively recruited from all continents, and from countries with multiple income statuses.

The role of the Steering Group includes decision making regarding the scope and remit of the project, contributing to the methodology and data analysis, establishing an international network of partner organisations and individuals to distribute surveys, and monitoring the progress of the project throughout. The Steering Group will meet virtually on a six-weekly basis. In addition to formal meetings, the Steering Group members will have access to the online forum 'Slack' (<https://slack.com/intl/en-gb/>) to review and comment on documents on a more regular basis and to ensure that the views of members not able to attend meetings can still be represented and discussed.

## Context and Scope

The Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership (PSP) methodology will be developed in accordance with standardised JLA practice(16). The scope of this research prioritisation project has been set by the Steering Group. The scope will be global to reflect the disproportionate incidence of burns injury in LMICs. We have used The World Bank definition of LMICs: “*low-income economies are defined as those with a GNI per capita, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method, of \$1,045 or less in 2020; lower middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$1,046 and \$4,095; upper middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$4,096 and \$12,695; high-income economies are those with a GNI per capita of \$12,696 or more.*”(21)

The Steering Group have agreed that the project would look for candidate research priorities in burn prevention, pre-hospital care and issues around treatment and recovery for patients who have sustained burns that require outpatient or in-patient hospital care. The care of patients with small area burns, that require little to no treatment (Body Surface Area (BSA) of less than 0.5%), will be excluded. Although there are healthcare infrastructure and health and safety regulation disparities between countries that will influence burn outcomes, the care and prevention of burn injuries was felt to be communal to all nations regardless of economy. Suggestions that focus on localised improvements to healthcare infrastructure and health and safety regulations will be excluded, as these are nation-specific. Lastly, the majority of global burn injuries are caused by thermal mechanisms, and therefore it was decided to focus on this area, excluding care for patients with other mechanisms of burn injury (such as chemical or electrical burns) or skin-loss conditions. The treatment and thus research priorities for the latter are different to those for thermal burns and these injuries may require their own prioritisation exercise.

In summary, the scope of this PSP is to identify:

- Any unanswered clinical question in international burn care or prevention for patients of any age or gender, with thermal burn injuries of any cause.

The scope will exclude:

- Factors relating to healthcare infrastructure and the economics of provision of care.
- Clinical questions relating to small area burns (defined as injuries of less than 0.5% BSA) not requiring hospital care.
- Care for non-thermal burns (e.g., chemical or electrical burns) and non-burn skin-loss conditions.

## 2. Gathering uncertainties from stakeholders (Survey One)

The Global Burns Research PSP will collect clinical uncertainties (candidate research priorities) from patients, carers and multidisciplinary healthcare professionals via online surveys and interviews.

The aim of the initial online survey is to gather uncertainties from stakeholders and will consist of broad open questions with free-text response options regarding which areas of burns care are most important to respondents. The survey will be created using REDCap software that will be hosted by the University of Bristol. REDCap is a secure online application used to capture data for clinical and health research(22). The survey will not collect any identifiable data, but respondents will have the option to supply an email address should they wish to be invited to take part in Survey Two. The non-identifiable data will be stored on a separate secure server to these email addresses so that no survey responses are identifiable.

The online survey is currently available in eight languages based on the predominant languages spoken worldwide and in the regions that have a high incidence of burn injuries. These languages are English, French, (Latin American) Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese (Simplified), Hindi and Bengali (23). The survey is accessible through the project website ([www.burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/survey1/](http://www.burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/survey1/)). Each language version has a dedicated page providing participant information, including what the survey is for, who should take part in the survey, what they are being asked to do and the confidential and anonymous nature of the data being collected. This information will be presented in text and as a plain language animation available in multiple languages. A professional translation service has undertaken the translations of all written and audio materials. As part of the translation process, all written material was proof-read by an independent translator and all surveys will be piloted by native speakers prior to launch to ensure accuracy of contextual translation.

Equity in participation in the survey will be enabled by addressing barriers in countries where internet access is limited by cost and infrastructure. In LMICs, accessing 1GB of data can cost in the range of 2-7% of an individual's monthly income(24, 25), meaning completion of the survey via the project website may be cost prohibitive. The social media app WhatsApp is free and is extensively used in LMICs(26). An alternative secondary means of data collection will be offered to participants from LMICs whereby a version of the survey that can be completed entirely on WhatsApp will be available on request. Data collected by this means will be subsequently entered into REDCap by the project team.



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3 The first survey will be open for approximately 12 weeks, to allow time for awareness to build across  
4 different countries and for responses to be submitted.  
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### 7 *Survey dissemination*

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9 A Global Burns Research PSP website (<https://burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/>) has been set up to  
10 explain the rationale and scope of the PSP. The online survey will be accessible via this website,  
11 WhatsApp and externally via direct weblinks and/or Quick Response (QR) codes, and is available in  
12 languages as detailed above. The Steering Group members and wider group of partner organisations  
13 and collaborators will distribute the surveys based on existing burn injury networks and contacts.  
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17 Methods for survey distributions will include:

- 18 • Social media platforms (e.g., Twitter (@burnspriorities), Facebook, WhatsApp);
- 19 • Personal emails of the steering group to known contacts;
- 20 • Burn patient support group websites, newsletters and emails;
- 21 • Burns and plastic surgery organisation websites and member distribution lists;
- 22 • Emails to lead clinical authors of burns publications in leading burns journals;
- 23 • Posters provided in different languages with WhatsApp contact details and QR codes to link  
24 to the survey.  
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31 There may also be the potential for clinicians or representatives at treatment centres in LMICs to  
32 complete surveys on the behalf of patients and carers who otherwise would not have access. This  
33 will be determined on a case-by-case basis.  
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### 37 *Participant interviews and literature searches*

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39 In addition to stakeholder surveys, in-depth interviews (n=10-20) will be conducted with survivors of  
40 burn injuries and clinicians, to gather additional data relating to potential research priorities. The  
41 Steering Group will provide oversight of recruitment, development of interview topic guides and  
42 data interpretation. Participants will be recruited through burn support groups, established  
43 contacts, burn networks and professional organisations using purposive sampling to maximise  
44 variation in demographics. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data will be  
45 analysed according to the principles of Thematic Analysis(27). In brief, research topics proposed by  
46 interviewees will be reviewed and broad question themes will be established. Topics and questions  
47 will then be assigned under the relevant themes in order to establish potential areas for research  
48 prioritisation. From these themes, research priorities, written in plain language, will be drafted and  
49 added to the longlist of research uncertainties generated by the survey.  
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3 Sources of evidence to demonstrate true research questions (evidence uncertainties) will be  
4 searched for in parallel with the surveys and interviews. Evidence certainties will be defined as  
5 systematic reviews or meta-analyses (or large high quality randomised controlled trials (RCT)) that  
6 can draw conclusions on effectiveness of interventions for burn care. These will be explored through  
7 a scoping umbrella review of systematic reviews in modern burn care (defined as the last ten years)  
8 using Medline, Embase, CINHAHL and the Cochrane Database. If a systematic review has been  
9 conducted and has concluded that evidence is available to support an intervention, the certainty of  
10 the evidence will be appraised. A second systematic review will search for more recent RCTs, or if a  
11 priority is chosen that has no systematic review associated with it. Individual RCTs will only be used if  
12 they are not included in a systematic review (e.g. when important RCT is published subsequent to  
13 the review). Non-randomised studies will not be included. Systematic reviews and RCTs will be  
14 assessed pragmatically for the purposes of determining the evidence gaps; the certainty of the  
15 evidence for each comparison–outcome combination will be considered more important than a  
16 formal rating of the methodological quality of the review. If included reviews have determined the  
17 certainty of evidence for their main outcomes, for example by applying the GRADE (Grading of  
18 Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluations) framework(28), we will use these  
19 evaluations of the certainty of evidence as provided in the review.  
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33 If the information required for a GRADE assessment is not reported, such reviews will be considered  
34 to be of a lower quality, because the lack of the consideration of the certainty of overall evidence  
35 will make a review less informative for the purposes of this project. If there are multiple reviews for  
36 the same intervention(s), one that has included the assessment of certainty of evidence would be  
37 preferable as this is highly informative for developing an evidence gap map. However, all reviews on  
38 the same topic will be inspected and reasons for any discrepancies between findings of reviews  
39 considered and recorded. Decision-making regarding evidence certainties will be completed by one  
40 researcher and verified by another, with differences of opinion resolved by consultation with a third  
41 researcher. We will consider high and moderate certainty evidence as sufficient to allow clinical  
42 decisions in burn care, while evidence of low and very low certainty will be recorded as an evidence  
43 gap. A list of evidence certainties in burn care, whereby evidence is sufficient to allow clinical  
44 decision-making, will be established. This information will be used to develop an evidence gap map  
45 (EGM) where evidence is lacking. EGMs are resources which provide a visual overview of where  
46 there is, and where there is not, evidence of reasonable certainty for effectiveness of an  
47 intervention(29-31).  
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### *Data analysis for Survey One*

All non-English survey data will be translated by a professional translation service (Bristol Transcription and Translation Services, Bristol, UK), which will include proof-reading by an independent translator. The initial survey is likely to produce a substantial volume of overlapping questions and research uncertainties(32). These 'raw' questions will be categorised and refined by the PSP core team (AY, HR, RS), with oversight from the Steering Group, into clear and conceptually distinct research priorities, worded in lay terminology. Similar or duplicate responses will be combined where appropriate, and questions which are outside the scope of the project will be compiled separately. These will not form part of the further prioritisation process, although they will be available for future use upon request.

This process will result in a long-list of in-scope verified summary research priorities that capture the themes and topics respondents have suggested, rather than specific research questions. Each candidate priority will be checked against sources of evidence and evidence certainties to determine which questions remain unanswered(33), with reference to the outcome of the scoping umbrella review of systematic reviews as described above. A question will be defined as 'answered' if evidence exists to allow clinical decision-making (see above).

The Steering Group will be involved in this process to ensure that raw data is being appropriately interpreted and that finalised research uncertainties can be traced back to raw data in a transparent way. Questions and uncertainties that are not adequately addressed by existing research will be collated for review and refinement by the Steering Group to produce a final list of summary priorities to progress to the interim priority setting survey.

### **Interim priority setting (Survey Two)**

A second survey will be distributed to patients and clinicians using the methods previously described. This survey will consist of the de-duplicated long-list of identified and verified research uncertainties. Those respondents to the first survey who chose to provide their email addresses will be sent a link to the second survey. This interim priority setting survey will be available in multiple languages, as described above. Respondents will be asked to select the ten priorities which are most important to them.

### *Data analysis for Survey Two*

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3 The priorities selected by clinicians, and those selected by patients and care-givers, will be reviewed  
4 separately. Separate scores will be kept, to ensure a fair weighting from the different constituent  
5 groups. Drawing from each group's priority list, the 18 highest ranked research uncertainties will be  
6 collated for the final prioritisation meeting. The Steering Group will oversee this process and will  
7 discuss any discrepancies with the ranking of questions until consensus is reached.  
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### 14 **3. Final priority setting and dissemination**

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17 The final priority setting will be a virtual workshop facilitated and chaired by the JLA. The workshop  
18 will involve patients, carers and clinicians discussing and then ranking the shortlist to determine the  
19 top ten research uncertainties. The Steering Group will not automatically be involved, in order to  
20 ensure final decisions are made by patients and clinician stakeholders, unbiased by the project team.  
21 If it is agreed that steering group members will be involved, only small numbers will take part to  
22 provide context for the research priorities. Measures will be taken to ensure this process is as  
23 inclusive and accessible as possible.  
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29 The final top ten research priorities will not be worded as research questions, but will be prioritised  
30 areas of burns care which represent evidence gaps considered to be most important by patients and  
31 clinicians. The identified priorities can be incorporated at a later point into discrete research  
32 questions which are applicable in different setting, e.g., higher and lower income countries and  
33 regions with limited access to specialist burns care treatment.  
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38 Additional work at the end of the project will be needed to develop the broad priority topics into  
39 specific research questions using the Population, Intervention, Comparator and Outcome (PICO)  
40 format, and match these topics with appropriate funding sources(34). Translating a top ten priority  
41 area into a potentially fundable research project requires mapping which aspects of the topic remain  
42 unanswered and require research, developing a focused research question and designing a suitable  
43 project. The UK National Institute of Health Research are automatically informed about the results of  
44 PSPs and encourage applications for funding based on a top ten priority(35). For example: in the  
45 'Blood Pressure in Pregnancy PSP', priority 9 was: What is the best way to manage pregnancy  
46 hypertension (including optimal antenatal and postnatal antihypertensive medication and optimal  
47 timing of delivery). The research question that has been funded by the NIHR is: 'how well blood  
48 pressure medicines used to treat high blood pressure in pregnancy work over a short time frame'.  
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### **Patient and public involvement**

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3 Patient and public involvement (PPI) refers to research which is carried out 'with' or 'by' members of  
4 the public, rather than 'about' or 'for' them(36). Collaborating with patients and members of the  
5 public ensures research answers the most relevant questions for service users and results in a  
6 positive impact on society. This project will be co-produced by patients and patient representatives  
7 throughout the research cycle. We will include patients with lived experience of burn injuries,  
8 service users, health care providers, caregivers and members of relevant charities and organisations.  
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10 Patients and their representatives will have key roles in the Steering Group, ensuring their continued  
11 involvement in decision making regarding protocol development, governance, ethical issues, and the  
12 overall progression of the project. Patients will be involved equally with clinicians in the  
13 establishment and prioritisation of research uncertainties by participating in the surveys, interviews,  
14 and prioritisation consensus meeting. Any patient and public facing project outputs (such as  
15 animations and infographics) will be reviewed by PPI members to ensure that the content is clear  
16 and relevant.  
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18 Evaluation of PPI contributions is vital to assess, and inform patients, of the significance of their  
19 contributions. Effective synthesis of PPI evidence will allow for identification of 'best practice' and  
20 lead to a better understanding of the impact of PPI. To optimise the quality and transparency of PPI  
21 reporting within the project, the GRIPP2 reporting guidelines will be used(37).  
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### 24 **Ethics and dissemination**

25 Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bristol Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics  
26 Committee (Ref 9944).  
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### 28 **Dissemination of the final Top Ten priorities for burn care research.**

29 The final top ten research priorities from the Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership will  
30 be translated into multiple languages and disseminated to international funders (governmental and  
31 non-governmental), stakeholders and global burn-related organisations identified by the Steering  
32 Group. Dissemination routes will include the international network of partners who distributed the  
33 surveys, global collaborators, burns charities and support groups and burn academic and clinical  
34 networks. Findings will be presented at international academic healthcare conferences related to  
35 burns and trauma, and published in peer-reviewed open-access academic journals. Additionally,  
36 animated videos, infographics and other accessible on-line content will be developed and  
37 disseminated(38, 39). Social media including twitter will be used for dissemination of results with  
38 translations enabled by the project collaborators(40-42).  
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3 Burn care lacks evidence to support clinical decision-making(43, 44). This results in variation of care  
4 and sub-optimal outcomes in some patients(6, 45). The findings of this PSP will potentially change  
5 burn research undertaken globally. It will allow researchers and research funders to focus research,  
6 and the scarce resources required to facilitate that research, on topics that are most important to  
7 patients, carers and health care professionals, thus decreasing research waste(46). In this way,  
8 research will be focused on relevant and verified clinical uncertainties and funding will be spent  
9 wisely.  
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19

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50 the JLA and SK to refine the methodology. AS lead on PPI engagement and contributed to survey  
51 dissemination methodology. JS lead on systematic review evidence checking strategies. HR drafted  
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53 methodology. CP read and edited the manuscript as a survivor of burn injury representative. All  
54 authors read, reviewed and approved the final manuscript.  
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# BMJ Open

## Protocol for a Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership to agree the most important unanswered questions in international burns care.

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**Title Page****Title: Protocol for a Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership to agree the most important unanswered questions in international burns care.**

H. Richards<sup>1,2</sup>, R. Staruch<sup>3</sup>, A. King<sup>1,2</sup>, C. Pugh, S. Kinsella<sup>4</sup>, J. Savović<sup>5,6</sup>, A.E. Young<sup>1,7</sup>

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Surgical Research, Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, England

<sup>2</sup>NIHR Bristol Biomedical Research Centre, University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation and the University of Bristol, England

<sup>3</sup>Botnar Research Centre, Department of Engineering Science, University of Oxford, Oxford, England

<sup>4</sup>The James Lind Alliance, National Institute for Health Research, School of Healthcare Enterprise and Innovation, University of Southampton, Alpha House, Enterprise Road, Southampton, England.

<sup>5</sup>Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, England

<sup>6</sup>National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration West at University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust, Bristol, England

<sup>7</sup>Children's Burns Research Centre Bristol Royal Hospital for Children, Bristol, England

**Corresponding author:**

Mrs. Hollie Richards  
Bristol Medical School: Population Health Sciences  
University of Bristol  
39 Whatley Road  
Bristol, BS8 2PS  
United Kingdom  
Email: hollie.richards@bristol.ac.uk, Tel: (00 44)117 928 7283

**Abstract:***Introduction:*

Burns affect 11 million people globally and can result in long-term disability with substantial associated healthcare costs. There is limited research funding to support trials to provide evidence for clinical decision-making. Research prioritisation ensures that research focuses on the topics most important to stakeholders, addressing issues of research waste and evidence gaps. The aim of this project is to agree the global top ten research priorities important to international patients, carers and clinicians from all income status countries.

*Methods and analysis:*

The Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership will use James Lind Alliance methods to establish the top ten research priorities in global burns care. An initial international online multilingual survey will collect candidate research priorities from stakeholders. To increase equity in participation, the survey will also be available via the social media app WhatsApp. Additionally, interviews will be conducted. Data will be analysed to identify and collate research questions and to verify that the priorities are true clinical uncertainties. This list will then be ranked by stakeholders in order of importance via a second online survey. Finally, a consensus meeting will identify the top ten research priorities.

*Ethics and dissemination:*

The University of Bristol Medical School Faculty Ethical Committee has approved this project. Research into burn care should be prioritised to ensure that funding is focused where most needed. This should be undertaken internationally, to ensure inclusion of the views of professionals and patients from lower income countries, where the incidence of thermal burns is highest. The involvement of the James Lind Alliance will ensure the methodology is robust and that the patient voice is heard. The final Top 10 priorities will be disseminated to funders, governments and researchers internationally to inform future global burns research.

**Keywords:** Research prioritisation; burn injuries; scalds; thermal injury; research methodology; research waste

**Abbreviations:** PSP: Prioritisation Setting Partnership; LMIC: Low- and middle-income countries;

### Strengths and limitations:

- We will use a standardised and proven methodology. The James Lind Alliance have undertaken research prioritisation exercises in more than 100 healthcare areas.
- We have established a Steering Group of international stakeholders and a wide network of clinical collaborators representing all income status countries.
- The online surveys will be available in eight languages and can also be completed using WhatsApp.
- Language, literacy levels and access to the internet may be barriers to survey access by low-income country participants. We will trial methods to address this limitation with international collaborators.

### Introduction

Burns injuries affect 11 million people globally and 140,000 people in England every year(1). Injuries can result in long-lasting functional and psychosocial disability(2). Healthcare costs are substantial, and are related to long hospital admissions, multiple surgeries, and the need for rehabilitation(3). Despite the importance to healthcare expenditure, quality of patient life and outcomes, there is a discrepancy between treatment burden and the volume of high-quality evidence in burn care(4, 5). There is thus no consensus on the best approach to current and new treatments(4), and subsequently a wide disparity in care exists between burn services within the UK and globally(6, 7). This lack of evidence matters, because single-question RCTs are costly and there is a scarcity of funding available for multiple trials(8, 9). Evidence to fill clinical knowledge gaps are also not specifically addressed and potential improvements to patient care are missed, as studies do not focus on research areas that are important to patients and clinicians (10, 11).

Research prioritisation ensures that research focusses on questions that are of the most potential benefit to improving outcomes(12). This decreases research waste and ensures the most effective use of scarce research funding(13). The process involves identifying and prioritising unmet research needs that are important to all relevant stakeholders(14). A standardised methodology for research priority setting is provided by the James Lind Alliance (JLA), (15) which is a non-profit initiative established in 2004 and supported by the UK National Institute of Health Research. The JLA places patients, caregivers and clinicians as central stakeholders(14, 16), bringing them together into Priority Setting Partnerships (PSP). These Partnerships aim to identify the top ten most important unanswered questions and research uncertainties(16). The process is comprised of three phases: 1) the formation of a Steering Group; 2) identifying, verifying, refining and prioritising research uncertainties from stakeholders via systematic reviews, surveys and interviews and 3) final agreement through a consensus meeting to agree the top ten research priorities.

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Priority setting exercises are most commonly undertaken within one country(16). However, burn injuries occur disproportionately in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with 70% of all burns occurring in these areas(17-19). Not only is the incidence higher in these regions, but access to specialist burn care is limited by geographical and economic constraints(19). To address this, the research priority setting exercise for burn care will have a global remit to ensure that the views of patients and clinicians from LMICs are represented.

Focusing research questions on those issues of highest priority to stakeholders will direct future trials to address current evidence gaps. It will reduce research waste(20) and will provide important new knowledge for researchers, funders and governments. The aim of this project is to work with the James Lind Alliance to identify the global top ten research priorities most important to international patients, carers and clinicians.

## Methods and Analysis

### 1. Steering Group.

The Global Burns Research priority setting partnership (PSP) will be led and managed by an international Steering Group which has been set-up to support the development of this protocol. Guidance on the development and selection of a steering group for research prioritisation exercises is limited. In this project, the aim was to select a steering group that provided expert international multidisciplinary professional experience (e.g. surgeons, intensivists, therapists and nursing staff) and those with lived experience of burn care. This was achieved through purposeful selection of individuals via burn professional organisations and patient/survivors through burn support groups and charities. To reflect the global scope of the project, Steering Group members have been purposively recruited from all continents, and from countries with multiple income statuses.

The role of the Steering Group includes decision making regarding the scope and remit of the project, contributing to the methodology and data analysis, establishing an international network of partner organisations and individuals to distribute surveys, and monitoring the progress of the project throughout. The Steering Group will meet virtually on a six-weekly basis. In addition to formal meetings, the Steering Group members will have access to the online forum 'Slack' (<https://slack.com/intl/en-gb/>) to review and comment on documents on a more regular basis and to ensure that the views of members not able to attend meetings can still be represented and discussed.



## Context and Scope

The Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership (PSP) methodology will be developed in accordance with standardised JLA practice(16). The scope of this research prioritisation project has been set by the Steering Group. The scope will be global to reflect the disproportionate incidence of burns injury in LMICs. We have used The World Bank definition of LMICs: *“low-income economies are defined as those with a GNI per capita, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method, of \$1,045 or less in 2020; lower middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$1,046 and \$4,095; upper middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$4,096 and \$12,695; high-income economies are those with a GNI per capita of \$12,696 or more.”*(21)

The Steering Group have agreed that the project would look for candidate research priorities in burn prevention, pre-hospital care and issues around treatment and recovery for patients who have sustained burns that require outpatient or in-patient hospital care. The care of patients with small area burns, that require little to no treatment (Body Surface Area (BSA) of less than 0.5%), will be excluded. Although there are healthcare infrastructure and health and safety regulation disparities between countries that will influence burn outcomes, the care and prevention of burn injuries was felt to be communal to all nations regardless of economy. Suggestions that focus on localised improvements to healthcare infrastructure and health and safety regulations will be excluded, as these are nation-specific. Lastly, the majority of global burn injuries are caused by thermal mechanisms, and therefore it was decided to focus on this area, excluding care for patients with other mechanisms of burn injury (such as chemical or electrical burns) or skin-loss conditions. The treatment and thus research priorities for the latter are different to those for thermal burns and these injuries may require their own prioritisation exercise. This JLA Protocol for this PSP is available at the James Lind Alliance website(22).

In summary, the scope of this PSP is to identify:

- Any unanswered clinical question in international burn care or prevention for patients of any age or gender, with thermal burn injuries of any cause.

The scope will exclude:

- Factors relating to healthcare infrastructure and the economics of provision of care.
- Clinical questions relating to small area burns (defined as injuries of less than 0.5% BSA) not requiring hospital care.
- Care for non-thermal burns (e.g., chemical or electrical burns) and non-burn skin-loss conditions.

## 2. Gathering uncertainties from stakeholders (Survey One)

The Global Burns Research PSP will collect clinical uncertainties (candidate research priorities) from patients, carers and multidisciplinary healthcare professionals via online surveys and interviews.

The aim of the initial online survey is to gather uncertainties from stakeholders and will consist of broad open questions with free-text response options regarding which areas of burns care are most important to respondents. The survey will be created using REDCap software that will be hosted by the University of Bristol. REDCap is a secure online application used to capture data for clinical and health research(23). The survey will not collect any identifiable data, but respondents will have the option to supply an email address should they wish to be invited to take part in Survey Two. The non-identifiable data will be stored on a separate secure server to these email addresses so that no survey responses are identifiable.

The online survey is currently available in eight languages based on the predominant languages spoken worldwide and in the regions that have a high incidence of burn injuries. These languages are English, French, (Latin American) Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese (Simplified), Hindi and Bengali (24). The survey is accessible through the project website ([www.burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/survey1/](http://www.burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/survey1/)). Each language version has a dedicated page providing participant information, including what the survey is for, who should take part in the survey, what they are being asked to do and the confidential and anonymous nature of the data being collected. This information will be presented in text and as a plain language animation available in multiple languages. A professional translation service has undertaken the translations of all written and audio materials. As part of the translation process, all written material was proof-read by an independent translator and all surveys will be piloted by native speakers prior to launch to ensure accuracy of contextual translation.

Equity in participation in the survey will be enabled by addressing barriers in countries where internet access is limited by cost and infrastructure. In LMICs, accessing 1GB of data can cost in the range of 2-7% of an individual's monthly income(25, 26), meaning completion of the survey via the project website may be cost prohibitive. The social media app WhatsApp is free and is extensively used in LMICs(27). An alternative secondary means of data collection will be offered to participants from LMICs whereby a version of the survey that can be completed entirely on WhatsApp will be available on request. Data collected by this means will be subsequently entered into REDCap by the project team.

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3 The first survey will be open for approximately 12 weeks, to allow time for awareness to build across  
4 different countries and for responses to be submitted.  
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### 7 *Survey dissemination*

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9 A Global Burns Research PSP website (<https://burnsresearch.bristol.ac.uk/>) has been set up to  
10 explain the rationale and scope of the PSP. The online survey will be accessible via this website,  
11 WhatsApp and externally via direct weblinks and/or Quick Response (QR) codes, and is available in  
12 languages as detailed above. The Steering Group members and wider group of partner organisations  
13 and collaborators will distribute the surveys based on existing burn injury networks and contacts.  
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17 Methods for survey distributions will include:

- 18 • Social media platforms (e.g., Twitter (@burnspriorities), Facebook, WhatsApp);
- 19 • Personal emails of the steering group to known contacts;
- 20 • Burn patient support group websites, newsletters and emails;
- 21 • Burns and plastic surgery organisation websites and member distribution lists;
- 22 • Emails to lead clinical authors of burns publications in leading burns journals;
- 23 • Posters provided in different languages with WhatsApp contact details and QR codes to link  
24 to the survey.  
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31 There may also be the potential for clinicians or representatives at treatment centres in LMICs to  
32 complete surveys on the behalf of patients and carers who otherwise would not have access. This  
33 will be determined on a case-by-case basis.  
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### 37 *Participant interviews and literature searches*

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39 In addition to stakeholder surveys, in-depth interviews (n=10-20) will be conducted with survivors of  
40 burn injuries and clinicians, to gather additional data relating to potential research priorities. The  
41 Steering Group will provide oversight of recruitment, development of interview topic guides and  
42 data interpretation. Participants will be recruited through burn support groups, established  
43 contacts, burn networks and professional organisations using purposive sampling to maximise  
44 variation in demographics. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data will be  
45 analysed according to the principles of Thematic Analysis(28). In brief, research topics proposed by  
46 interviewees will be reviewed and broad question themes will be established. Topics and questions  
47 will then be assigned under the relevant themes in order to establish potential areas for research  
48 prioritisation. From these themes, research priorities, written in plain language, will be drafted and  
49 added to the longlist of research uncertainties generated by the survey.  
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3 Sources of evidence to demonstrate true research questions (evidence uncertainties) will be  
4 searched for in parallel with the surveys and interviews. Evidence certainties will be defined as  
5 systematic reviews or meta-analyses (or large high quality randomised controlled trials (RCT)) that  
6 can draw conclusions on effectiveness of interventions for burn care. These will be explored through  
7 a scoping umbrella review of systematic reviews in modern burn care (defined as the last ten years)  
8 using Medline, Embase, CINHAHL and the Cochrane Database. If a systematic review has been  
9 conducted and has concluded that evidence is available to support an intervention, the certainty of  
10 the evidence will be appraised. A second systematic review will search for more recent RCTs, or if a  
11 priority is chosen that has no systematic review associated with it. Individual RCTs will only be used if  
12 they are not included in a systematic review (e.g. when important RCT is published subsequent to  
13 the review). Non-randomised studies will not be included. Systematic reviews and RCTs will be  
14 assessed pragmatically for the purposes of determining the evidence gaps; the certainty of the  
15 evidence for each comparison–outcome combination will be considered more important than a  
16 formal rating of the methodological quality of the review. If included reviews have determined the  
17 certainty of evidence for their main outcomes, for example by applying the GRADE (Grading of  
18 Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluations) framework(29), we will use these  
19 evaluations of the certainty of evidence as provided in the review.  
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33 If the information required for a GRADE assessment is not reported, such reviews will be considered  
34 to be of a lower quality, because the lack of the consideration of the certainty of overall evidence  
35 will make a review less informative for the purposes of this project. If there are multiple reviews for  
36 the same intervention(s), one that has included the assessment of certainty of evidence would be  
37 preferable as this is highly informative for developing an evidence gap map. However, all reviews on  
38 the same topic will be inspected and reasons for any discrepancies between findings of reviews  
39 considered and recorded. Decision-making regarding evidence certainties will be completed by one  
40 researcher and verified by another, with differences of opinion resolved by consultation with a third  
41 researcher. We will consider high and moderate certainty evidence as sufficient to allow clinical  
42 decisions in burn care, while evidence of low and very low certainty will be recorded as an evidence  
43 gap. A list of evidence certainties in burn care, whereby evidence is sufficient to allow clinical  
44 decision-making, will be established. This information will be used to develop an evidence gap map  
45 (EGM) where evidence is lacking. EGMs are resources which provide a visual overview of where  
46 there is, and where there is not, evidence of reasonable certainty for effectiveness of an  
47 intervention(30-32).  
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### *Data analysis for Survey One*

All non-English survey data will be translated by a professional translation service (Bristol Transcription and Translation Services, Bristol, UK), which will include proof-reading by an independent translator. The initial survey is likely to produce a substantial volume of overlapping questions and research uncertainties(33). These 'raw' questions will be categorised and refined by the PSP core team (AY, HR, RS), with oversight from the Steering Group, into clear and conceptually distinct research priorities, worded in lay terminology. Similar or duplicate responses will be combined where appropriate, and questions which are outside the scope of the project will be compiled separately. These will not form part of the further prioritisation process, although they will be available for future use upon request.

This process will result in a long-list of in-scope verified summary research priorities that capture the themes and topics respondents have suggested, rather than specific research questions. Each candidate priority will be checked against sources of evidence and evidence certainties to determine which questions remain unanswered(34), with reference to the outcome of the scoping umbrella review of systematic reviews as described above. A question will be defined as 'answered' if evidence exists to allow clinical decision-making (see above).

The Steering Group will be involved in this process to ensure that raw data is being appropriately interpreted and that finalised research uncertainties can be traced back to raw data in a transparent way. Questions and uncertainties that are not adequately addressed by existing research will be collated for review and refinement by the Steering Group to produce a final list of summary priorities to progress to the interim priority setting survey.

### **Interim priority setting (Survey Two)**

A second survey will be distributed to patients and clinicians using the methods previously described. This survey will consist of the de-duplicated long-list of identified and verified research uncertainties. Those respondents to the first survey who chose to provide their email addresses will be sent a link to the second survey. This interim priority setting survey will be available in multiple languages, as described above. Respondents will be asked to select the ten priorities which are most important to them.

### *Data analysis for Survey Two*

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3 The priorities selected by clinicians, and those selected by patients and care-givers, will be reviewed  
4 separately. Separate scores will be kept, to ensure a fair weighting from the different constituent  
5 groups. Drawing from each group's priority list, the 18 highest ranked research uncertainties will be  
6 collated for the final prioritisation meeting. The Steering Group will oversee this process and will  
7 discuss any discrepancies with the ranking of questions until consensus is reached.  
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### 14 **3. Final priority setting and dissemination**

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17 The final priority setting will be a virtual workshop facilitated and chaired by the JLA. The workshop  
18 will involve patients, carers and clinicians discussing and then ranking the shortlist to determine the  
19 top ten research uncertainties. The Steering Group will not automatically be involved, in order to  
20 ensure final decisions are made by patients and clinician stakeholders, unbiased by the project team.  
21 If it is agreed that steering group members will be involved, only small numbers will take part to  
22 provide context for the research priorities. Measures will be taken to ensure this process is as  
23 inclusive and accessible as possible.  
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29 The final top ten research priorities will not be worded as research questions, but will be prioritised  
30 areas of burns care which represent evidence gaps considered to be most important by patients and  
31 clinicians. The identified priorities can be incorporated at a later point into discrete research  
32 questions which are applicable in different setting, e.g., higher and lower income countries and  
33 regions with limited access to specialist burns care treatment.  
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38 Additional work at the end of the project will be needed to develop the broad priority topics into  
39 specific research questions using the Population, Intervention, Comparator and Outcome (PICO)  
40 format, and match these topics with appropriate funding sources(35). Translating a top ten priority  
41 area into a potentially fundable research project requires mapping which aspects of the topic remain  
42 unanswered and require research, developing a focused research question and designing a suitable  
43 project. The UK National Institute of Health Research are automatically informed about the results of  
44 PSPs and encourage applications for funding based on a top ten priority(36). For example: in the  
45 'Blood Pressure in Pregnancy PSP', priority 9 was: What is the best way to manage pregnancy  
46 hypertension (including optimal antenatal and postnatal antihypertensive medication and optimal  
47 timing of delivery). The research question that has been funded by the NIHR is: 'how well blood  
48 pressure medicines used to treat high blood pressure in pregnancy work over a short time frame'.  
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### **Patient and public involvement**

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3 Patient and public involvement (PPI) refers to research which is carried out 'with' or 'by' members of  
4 the public, rather than 'about' or 'for' them(37). Collaborating with patients and members of the  
5 public ensures research answers the most relevant questions for service users and results in a  
6 positive impact on society. This project will be co-produced by patients and patient representatives  
7 throughout the research cycle. We will include patients with lived experience of burn injuries,  
8 service users, health care providers, caregivers and members of relevant charities and organisations.  
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10 Patients and their representatives will have key roles in the Steering Group, ensuring their continued  
11 involvement in decision making regarding protocol development, governance, ethical issues, and the  
12 overall progression of the project. Patients will be involved equally with clinicians in the  
13 establishment and prioritisation of research uncertainties by participating in the surveys, interviews,  
14 and prioritisation consensus meeting. Any patient and public facing project outputs (such as  
15 animations and infographics) will be reviewed by PPI members to ensure that the content is clear  
16 and relevant.  
17

18 Evaluation of PPI contributions is vital to assess, and inform patients, of the significance of their  
19 contributions. Effective synthesis of PPI evidence will allow for identification of 'best practice' and  
20 lead to a better understanding of the impact of PPI. To optimise the quality and transparency of PPI  
21 reporting within the project, the GRIPP2 reporting guidelines will be used(38).  
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### 25 **Ethics and dissemination**

26 Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bristol Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics  
27 Committee (Ref 9944).  
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### 30 **Dissemination of the final Top Ten priorities for burn care research.**

31 The final top ten research priorities from the Global Burns Research Priority Setting Partnership will  
32 be translated into multiple languages and disseminated to international funders (governmental and  
33 non-governmental), stakeholders and global burn-related organisations identified by the Steering  
34 Group. Dissemination routes will include the international network of partners who distributed the  
35 surveys, global collaborators, burns charities and support groups and burn academic and clinical  
36 networks. Findings will be presented at international academic healthcare conferences related to  
37 burns and trauma, and published in peer-reviewed open-access academic journals. Additionally,  
38 animated videos, infographics and other accessible on-line content will be developed and  
39 disseminated(39, 40). Social media including twitter will be used for dissemination of results with  
40 translations enabled by the project collaborators(41-43).  
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3 Burn care lacks evidence to support clinical decision-making(44, 45). This results in variation of care  
4 and sub-optimal outcomes in some patients(6, 46). The findings of this PSP will potentially change  
5 burn research undertaken globally. It will allow researchers and research funders to focus research,  
6 and the scarce resources required to facilitate that research, on topics that are most important to  
7 patients, carers and health care professionals, thus decreasing research waste(47). In this way,  
8 research will be focused on relevant and verified clinical uncertainties and funding will be spent  
9 wisely.  
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47 dissemination methodology. JS lead on systematic review evidence checking strategies. HR drafted  
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49 methodology. CP read and edited the manuscript as a survivor of burn injury representative. All  
50 authors read, reviewed and approved the final manuscript.  
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55 *Data sharing:* Data will be available upon reasonable request following completion of the project.  
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