Undertaking a literature review: Developing a research question and searching the literature

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Learning objectives

At the completion of this seminar, you should be able to:

1. Formulate a review question
2. Develop eligibility criteria for the selection of studies
3. Translate the research question into relevant research concepts, key terms, and controlled vocabularies
4. Develop a search query for different databases (e.g. MEDLINE, CENTRAL, EMBASE, and CINHAL)
Steps of a literature review

- Develop the review question and eligibility criteria
- Plan methods and develop a protocol
- Search for studies
  - Apply eligibility criteria for the selection of studies
  - Extract data
  - Assess risk of bias in included studies (if applicable)
- Analyze and present results
- Interpret results and formulate conclusions
## Typology of reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review Type</th>
<th>Overarching Goal</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Search strategy</th>
<th>Primary sources</th>
<th>Explicit study selection</th>
<th>Quality appraisal</th>
<th>Synthesis methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative review</td>
<td>Summarization of prior knowledge</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Conceptual and empirical studies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Narrative summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive or mapping review</td>
<td>Summarization of prior knowledge</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Empirical studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Frequency analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical review</td>
<td>Critical synthesis</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Selective or representative</td>
<td>Conceptual or empirical</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Not essential</td>
<td>Critical interpretive methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical review</td>
<td>Explanation building</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>Conceptual and empirical studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Content analysis &amp; interpretive methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scoping review</td>
<td>Summarization of prior knowledge</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>Conceptual and empirical studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not essential</td>
<td>Content or thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic review (with or without meta-analysis)</td>
<td>Data aggregation or integration</td>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td>Exhaustive</td>
<td>Empirical studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Met-analysis, vote counting, or qualitative synthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realist Review</td>
<td>Explanation building</td>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td>Iterative &amp; purposive</td>
<td>Conceptual and empirical</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mixed methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of SRs (Umbrella review)</td>
<td>Summarization of multiple systematic reviews</td>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td>Exhaustive</td>
<td>Systematic reviews</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Met-analysis, vote counting, or qualitative synthesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Developing the review question(s)

• Essential first step for your review
• Guides many aspects of your methods
  • Type of review (e.g. systematic review, scoping review, narrative review)
  • Eligibility criteria
  • Search strategy
  • Data collection and analysis
• Think carefully in advance
• Address a question of importance and relevance
• Address real choices faced in decision making
• Are there any similar reviews?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Narrow</th>
<th>Broad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>• Peer education interventions for HIV prevention in young men</td>
<td>• Interventions for HIV prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Text-messaging interventions for improving physical activity</td>
<td>• Behavioral interventions for improving physical activity in people at high risk of CVD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td>• Easy to write</td>
<td>• Comprehensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Easy to read</td>
<td>• Generalizable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
<td>• May be selectively defined</td>
<td>• Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Need multiple reviews</td>
<td>• May miss subgroup effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Overview of reviews may be preferable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Frameworks for developing the review question

• PICO(S)
  • population, intervention, comparison, outcomes, study design

• CIMO
  • (context, intervention, mechanisms, outcomes)
PICO Framework

• **Population**: health condition/diagnosis, age, gender, ethnicity

• **Intervention**: type, dose, intensity, timing, location, context, alone or in combination with other interventions

• **Comparison**: define specific active comparisons in much detail. Be clear what you mean “usual care” or “no intervention”. Can remain open to any comparisons found

• **Outcomes**: identify meaningful outcomes used in studies of related topics and key time points, including measurement options.
Review objective

• A precise statement of the primary objective
• Usually one sentence
• May also include specific objectives relating to different
  • participant groups
  • comparisons of interventions
  • outcome measures

To assess the effects of [intervention or comparison] for [health problem] for/in [types of people, disease or problem and setting if specified].
Some examples of review objectives...

- To assess the effects of self-monitoring mobile apps in patients with diabetes
- To assess the effectiveness of hip protectors for preventing hip fractures in older people
- To assess the impact of structured telephone support on hospital readmissions in recently discharged patients (< 30 days) with chronic heart failure
- To assess the impact of structured telephone support in patients with chronic heart failure
- To assess the methodological quality of systematic reviews of HIV interventions
Group exercise #1

Formulate your own research question/objective using the PICO framework
Developing eligibility criteria

• Eligibility criteria are a combination of aspects of the review question plus specification of the types of studies that have addressed these questions (e.g. randomized controlled trials)

• The participants, interventions and comparisons in the clinical question usually translate directly into eligibility criteria for the review

• Outcomes usually are not part of the criteria for including studies
Example

Review objective:

• To review randomized controlled trials of non-invasive home telemonitoring interventions compared to standard practice for people with heart failure, in order to quantify the effects of these interventions over and above usual care

• Inclusion criteria:
  • Population: Adults (aged 18 years and over) of either sex, any age or ethnic group, with a definitive diagnosis of heart failure
  • Intervention: [Description of] non-invasive home telemonitoring
  • Comparison: “Usual care” consisted of standard post-discharge care without intensified attendance at cardiology clinics or clinic-based heart failure disease management program, or home visits
Eligibility assessment form

Caffeine for daytime drowsiness
Eligibility checklist

Study ID: ____________________________
Screened by: ________________________

3. Study design
Is the study a randomised controlled trial?
☐ Yes ☐ No (exclude) ☐ Can’t tell

2. Participants
Did the study include adults undergoing normal daily activities?
☐ Yes ☐ No (exclude) ☐ Can’t tell

Did the study include adults reporting symptoms of daytime drowsiness (e.g., reduced alertness, fatigue or lowered mood)?
☐ Yes ☐ No (exclude) ☐ Can’t tell

Did the study include participants under conditions of sleep deprivation?
☐ Yes (exclude) ☐ No ☐ Can’t tell

Did the study include participants taking stimulants?
☐ Yes (exclude) ☐ No ☐ Can’t tell

Did the study include participants with a psychiatric disorder, chronic fatigue or postural syndrome?
☐ Yes (exclude) ☐ No ☐ Can’t tell

3. Interventions
Did the intervention group receive a preparation or dose of caffeine (e.g., instant, brewed or espresso coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, intravenous or pill)?
☐ Yes ☐ No (exclude) ☐ Can’t tell

Did the control group also receive a preparation or dose of caffeine?
☐ Yes (exclude) ☐ No ☐ Can’t tell

Should this study be included in the review?
☐ INCLUDE ☐ EXCLUDE ☐ CAN’T TELL
A rigorous approach to searching

• Reviews require an extensive search - MEDLINE is not enough!
• a limited search may find an unrepresentative set of studies
  • Incomplete results
  • Selection bias
  • Reduced generalizability
• Balance sensitivity with efficiency
A rigorous approach to searching
Sources to search

• Bibliographic databases likely to identify the majority of your studies
  • Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL)
  • MEDLINE
  • EMBASE
  • and others (e.g. CINHAL, PsycINFO)

• Other sources
  • Grey literature databases (e.g. PROQUEST)
  • Trial registries (clinicaltrials.gov)
  • Conference abstracts and proceedings (known conference related to your topic)
  • Reference lists, citations, and related articles
  • Dissertation databases
  • Unpublished and ongoing studies (contact field experts and colleagues) – very important to minimize bias
How do databases index articles?

- Controlled vocabulary (e.g. Medical Subject Headings – MeSH terms)
- Titles and abstracts only – not full-text article
- Authors, affiliations, keywords, journals/publishers
- Other identifiers (e.g. study design/publication type, language, dates)

Be aware
- Lag time between publication and indexing of an article
- Overlapping of databases – leads to duplicate references returned
- Each database has its own search engine
- MEDLINE can be accessed either via PubMed or Ovid
Constructing a good search strategy

• Don’t try this alone. Always consult your librarian!
• Reviews (especially systematic reviews) require complex, rigorous search strategies
• This session is an introduction to basic principles only
Structure of a search strategy

• Based on your research objective and eligibility criteria
• Start with the 2 or 3 most important concepts
• Focus on those most likely to be found in title & abstract

P  participants
I  intervention
C  comparison
O  outcomes
S  study design
Step 1: Developing main concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main concept</td>
<td>Main concept</td>
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Step 1: Developing main concepts and search terms

Example:
“To review randomized controlled trials of non-invasive home telemonitoring compared to standard practice for people with heart failure, in order to quantify the effects of these interventions over and above usual care”

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<td>Main concept</td>
<td>Main concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart failure</td>
<td>Telemonitoring</td>
<td>Randomized controlled trial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 2: Turning concepts into search terms

• Aim for high **sensitivity**
  • express each concept in as many ways as possible
  • minimize the risk of missing a relevant study
  • will lead to lower precision – find a balance

• Use both **text words** and **controlled vocabulary** (e.g. MeSH terms)

• preliminary searching may help test your strategy

• strategies must be translated for every database or interface
Text words

- Include synonyms, related terms, opposites (if necessary), international terms, alternative spellings, plurals
  - e.g. telehealth, telemonitoring, telemedicine, telecare
  - Brain injury, head injury, skull injury, skull fracture

- **Truncation and wildcards** * $ ?
  - Telemonitor* = telemonitor, telemonitors, telemonitoring
  - But beware – car* = cars (but also carcinoma)

- **Phrases can be put in quotes or you can use proximity operators**
  - e.g. “home telemonitoring”

- **Proximity operators – NEAR, NEXT, ADJ**
  - Ovid (ADJ): Liver ADJ3 cancer = liver cancer, liver and bowel cancer
  - Cochrane Library: The ‘NEAR’ operator will find the search terms within six words of each other
  - Cochrane Library: The ‘NEXT’ operator is more sensitive (i.e. retrieves more hits) than the alternative method of phrase searching using quotation marks
  - Note: if you are using PubMed to search Medline, PubMed does not use proximity operators. If you want to use proximity operators, you must use Ovid
Controlled Vocabulary

- standardized subject terms assigned by indexers
  - Medline and Cochrane Library use MeSH terms
  - EMBASE uses the EMTREE
  - identifies relevant articles even if different terms are used for the same concept
  - ‘explode’ to include all narrower terms
  - caution – indexers may not be subject experts, and authors may not describe their study very well

- check the terms applied to relevant papers for ideas

- use database tools to map words to subject terms

- controlled vocabulary must be translated for each database
Step 2: Turning concepts into search terms

Example:
“To review randomized controlled trials of non-invasive home telemonitoring compared to standard practice for people with heart failure, in order to quantify the effects of these interventions over and above usual care”

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<tr>
<td>Heart failure</td>
<td>Telemonitoring</td>
<td>Randomized controlled trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms/search terms</td>
<td>Synonyms/search terms</td>
<td>Synonyms/search terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac failure</td>
<td>Telehealth</td>
<td>Controlled clinical trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telemedicine</td>
<td>Random allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telecare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telemetry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 2: Turning concepts into search terms

Heart Failure
1. Heart Failure [MeSH Term]
2. heart failure
3. cardiac failure

Telemonitoring
4. Telemedicine [MeSH Term:noexp]
5. Remote consultation [MeSH Term]
6. telecare
7. telemonitor*
Group exercise #2

Create your own search terms for your review question/objective
Step 4: Selecting search fields and filters

Each database has its own set of filters. Below are some of the most frequently used filters

• **Ovid** - `.tw.` searches in title/abstract; `.ti.` searches only in the title; `.ab.` searches only in the abstract; `.pt.` searches in the publication type field

• **PubMed** - [Title/Abstract] searches only in the title and abstract; [Text Word] searches in the title, abstract, and keywords; [Publication Type] searches for specific publication type articles (e.g. RCTs)

• **Cochrane Library** - `:ti,ab,kw` searches in the title, abstract, and keywords; `:pt` searches the type of publication
Step 5: Study design filters

• A set of search terms to limit your results to specific study designs (e.g. RCTs)
• Research has been done to identify the most sensitive and efficient search terms
• Select according to:
  • database and interface to be searched
  • study designs needed for your review

• Do not use an RCT filter when searching CENTRAL
Step 5: Study design filters

- Cochrane highly sensitive search strategy for RCTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitivity-maximising version, MEDLINE (PubMed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. randomized controlled trial [pt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. controlled clinical trial [pt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. randomized [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. placebo [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. drug therapy [sh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. randomly [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. trial [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. groups [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. #1 OR #2 OR #3 OR #4 OR #5 OR #6 OR #7 OR #8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. animals [mh] NOT humans [mh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. #9 NOT #10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Box 6.4.a of the Handbook
Boolean Operators

- **bicycle**  **helmet**
  - OR – to expand search

- **bicycle**  **helmet**
  - AND – to narrow search
Step 4: Bringing it all together
### Step 4: Bringing it all together

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Study design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR Telecare [tiab]</td>
<td>OR Controlled clinical trial [pt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heart failure [tiab]</td>
<td>OR Telemonitor* [tiab]</td>
<td>OR Placebo [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Clinical trials as topic [mesh: noexp]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac Failure [tiab]</td>
<td></td>
<td>OR Ranodmly [tiab]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OR Trial [ti]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample MEDLINE Strategy using the PubMed interface

Heart Failure
1. Heart Failure [Mesh:noexp]
2. heart failure [tiab]
3. cardiac failure [tiab]
4. or/1-3
5. Telemedicine [Mesh:noexp]
6. telecare [tiab]
7. telemonitor* [tiab]
8. #5 OR #6 OR 7
9. randomized controlled trial [pt]
10. controlled clinical trial [pt]
11. randomized [tiab]
12. placebo [tiab]
13. drug therapy [sh]
14. randomly [tiab]
15. trial [tiab]
16. groups [tiab]
17. #9 OR #10 OR #11 OR #12 OR #13 OR #14 OR #15 OR #16
18. animals [mh] NOT humans [mh]
19. #17 NOT #18
20. #4 AND #8 AND #19

Telemonitoring

RCTs

Heart Failure

Telemedicine

RCTs

Diseases Category
Cardiovascular Diseases
Heart Diseases
Heart Failure
Cardio-Renal Syndrome
Dyspnea Paroxysmal
Edema Cardiac
Heart Failure, Diastolic
Heart Failure, Systolic

Information Science Category
Information Science

Communications Media
Telecommunications

Remote Consultation
Telepathology
Teleradiology
Telerhabilitation
Limits and restrictions

• To avoid bias, do not limit by:
  • Language
  • Year – unless there is a clear point (e.g. cell phones were not available in the 70s or 80s)
  • Format – may be additional information about a study in letters, etc.
Screening and selection process
Take home messages

• Work closely with a librarian and/or an expert in search strategies for literature reviews to develop your search query
• Plan a systematic search, balancing sensitivity, precision, and efficiency
• Think about the key concepts of your question, and how they might be described
• Search strategy must be translated for every database and interface
• Start with CENTRAL, MEDLINE and EMBASE – then consider other appropriate sources
• Manage and keep careful records of your search strategies