

Quality of Systematic Reviews in Nursing Literature

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Problem: In evidence-based practice, effective nursing care depends upon high quality systematic reviews (SRs). SRs published in nursing literature must be rigorous so as not to misinform clinical decisions. The question remains: What is the quality of SRs published in nursing literature?

Evidence: SRs have been called the heart of evidence-based practice (EBP) because of the vital function they fulfill in synthesizing research knowledge into a useable form (Stevens, 2001). While methods of research synthesis clearly specify rigorous research design for conducting SRs (e.g., Cochrane Handbook), reviews in leading medical journals do not use rigorous scientific methods (Mulrow, 1987; Delaney *et al.*, 2005). Rigor of SRs published in nursing literature has not been evaluated, as evidenced from lack of such evaluations in the nursing literature.

Strategy: A bibliometric study was conducted to determine scientific quality of SRs in nursing literature. We developed and used expert CINAHL searches to locate SRs, randomly sampled the population of SRs to obtain 10 reviews, and two reviewers critically appraised the SRs using the Overview Quality Assessment Questionnaire (OQAQ).

Practice Change:
Closer scrutiny of quality of SRs.

Evaluation:
Critical appraisals of selected SRs were accomplished by two reviewers using well-established critical appraisal tools – the OQAQ.

Results:

- The 39 SRs (CINAHL classification) in 1998 grew to 250 in 2005
- The number of SRs classified by authors remains static
- “Reviews” were over-classified into the publication type, “systematic review” as compared to articles author-classified as SRs
- Author-classified SRs scored > median quality score
- The OQAQ has multifaceted questions and was demanding to use when evaluating reviews with scant rigor
- Interpretive statements must be used with the OQAQ
- Critical appraisal is time-intensive and requires advanced skills.

Recommendations:

The preponderance of nursing publications in the sample lacked the necessary rigor to develop the science base for evidence-based practice. Therefore, clinicians must use SRs in the nursing literature with caution in establishing best practice. A larger study is proposed.

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