

Systematic review articles – the review protocol

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Introduction

Over the past years, literature review articles have gained recognition since they enable the better understanding of published information. The term “review” means have a second view, examine again [1]. Several attempts have been made in order to distinguish different review types; Sutton et al [2] identified 48 review types belonging in 7 different families, while Grant et al [1] classified review articles in 14 main categories. Structure and methodology are different in each type, but setting clear limits and discriminate between review types is a challenge.

Systematic review is one of the most common types, together with narrative and scoping reviews [3] and it can be considered as the traditional type of review [2]. Systematic reviews aim to identify, evaluate and summarize the findings of all relevant individual studies. Moreover they can easily locate the lack of knowledge so as to guide further research. In order to obtain these benefits, review preparation and conduction has to be rigorous [4].

Systematic review protocol

Review protocol defines in advance the methods that are going to be used and has as a target to minimize biases. The basic steps are [5]:

1. Set review question
2. Define the inclusion criteria
3. Identify research evidence
4. Study selection
5. Data extraction
6. Quality assessment
7. Data synthesis
8. Dissemination of findings

Information sources

Systematic reviews should include, but not be limited to, data collected from bibliographic databases. More than one database should be used, enriched with information from other sources, such as conference papers or through web searching.

As search method, hand search, reference list check, citation check and contact with experts can also be used [2].

Systematic reviews have been extensively performed by the Cochrane collaboration, an International organization aiming to collect in a reliable way all available information and facilitate decisions especially related to healthcare topics. A huge amount of information, impossible to evaluate its size, is available to healthcare workers, scientists, consumers and policy makers. Systematic reviews can collect, and present, this information in a valid way [6].

Systematic review main advantage

Collection and offer of access to all known information about a specific topic with concurrent production of reliable conclusions

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