Strategies for finding systematic reviews

Three sources of systematic reviews are shown below, and often it will make sense to search these in the order in which they are listed. To fill in any gaps, subsequent searches can be used to supplement earlier ones using a more targeted approach (e.g. by focusing on those options for which no systematic reviews were found) or to find more recent reviews (if only outdated reviews have been found). Additional strategies that can be used to fill in gaps or find more recent reviews are summarised below, following brief descriptions of the advantages, disadvantages, and search strategies for Health Systems Evidence, The Cochrane Library and PubMed.

The EVIPNet Virtual Health Library (www.evipnet.org) is being developed to provide quick and easy access to evidence for informed decisions about health systems in low- and middle-income countries. It will provide a meta-search engine to facilitate searching these and other databases.

Health Systems Evidence – www.healthsystemsevidence.org

Advantages:

- Focused exclusively on health system arrangements and implementation strategies
- Contains bibliographic information with links to user-friendly summaries (when these are available) for Cochrane reviews, other reviews of impacts, and reviews that address other types of questions (e.g. reviews of qualitative studies), as well as overviews of systematic reviews and policy briefs
- Indexed and can be searched using a framework for health systems arrangements

Disadvantages:

- May lag behind The Cochrane Library and PubMed. May also not include all the systematic reviews of health system arrangements from PubMed and The Cochrane Library due to limitations of its search strategies

Searching Health Systems Evidence:

- Can be searched by clicking on the types of health system arrangements that are of interest or by using free text
- Currently fewer than 1,500 records: searching is therefore relatively easy

The Cochrane Library – www.thecochranelibrary.com

Advantages:

- Contains full-text versions of Cochrane reviews in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR)
- Contains structured abstracts of other reviews of effects from the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE) and the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Database
- Updated monthly

Disadvantages:

- May lag behind PubMed, DARE, and HTA databases, and may not include all the reviews of health system arrangements found in PubMed

Searching The Cochrane Library:

- Can be searched using text words, index terms and Boolean logic
- More than 30,000 records currently in the CDSR, DARE and HTA databases. Searching is still relatively easy
- The most up-to-date versions of DARE and the HTA databases can be searched online (http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/crdweb/SearchPage.asp)

PubMed – www.pubmed.gov

Advantages:

- Contains bibliographic information, index terms, and abstracts
- More up-to-date and possibly more comprehensive than Health Systems Evidence and The Cochrane Library with regard to systematic reviews that have been published in journals
- More sophisticated searching is possible
- Updated daily

Disadvantages:

- Systematic reviews of health system arrangements form only a small proportion of the more than 20 million records. It is therefore harder to search for these and may require training and practice
- Does not include grey literature and does not include all journals. Therefore the database may not have some systematic reviews that are included in Health Systems Evidence or The Cochrane Library

Searching PubMed:

- Can be searched using text words, index terms, and Boolean logic
- After relevant articles are identified, a sophisticated algorithm allows searches for additional 'related articles'
- Possible to use a 'hedge', or filter, for systematic reviews (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/pubmedutils/clinical)

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Additional search strategies

Support summaries (www.support-collaboration.org) SUPPORT Summaries are concise summaries of systematic reviews of the effects of health system interventions for low- and middle-income countries. They include summary of findings tables prepared using the GRADE framework and assessments of the relevance of the findings for low- and middle-income countries.

Google Scholar – (scholar.google.com/schhp?hl=en&tab=ws) can be used for citation searching and may sometimes be helpful for identifying published reviews as well as reviews in the grey literature by using advanced features and precise terms (e.g. putting terms like "systematic review" in quotation marks to enable exact phrase searching).

Personal contact – with people who have health systems and/or systematic review expertise may be helpful, particularly for finding unpublished, more recent, and otherwise hard-to-find systematic reviews.

Other databases - such as ISI Web of Science (for citation searching) and EMBASE may require a subscription or the assistance of a research librarian. A list of databases, web sites, and journals relevant to low- and middle-income countries can be found on the Norwegian Cochrane Effective Practice and Organisation of Care (EPOC) Satellite's website (see http://epocoslo.cochrane.org/lmic-databases).

Retrieving full-text copies of systematic reviews

HINARI – www.who.int/hinari/en

HINARI provides free access or low-cost access to a large number of journals. It is available to registered institutions in low-income countries. Users with a password from a registered institution can access Highwire Free Access for Developing Countries (this includes HINARI and other selected resources).

The Cochrane Library

Anyone with an IP address from a low-income country has free, single-click access to The Cochrane Library, including the full text of Cochrane reviews. The Cochrane Library can also be accessed through HINARI.

Open access journals

Open access journals provide free full-text versions online. Others journals may place free full-text articles online after a period of time.

- BioMed Central (BMC) journals www.biomedcentral.com/browse/journals
- Public Library of Sciences journals, including PloS Medicine www.plos.org
- SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), including the Bulletin of the World Health Organization and many journals from Latin America www.scielo.org

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Directories of open-access or free journals

- Directory of Open Access Journals www.doaj.org
- Free Medical Journals www.freemedicaljournals.com
- Open J-Gate www.openj-gate.com

Repositories of full text articles – through which journal publishers make articles available (usually after a defined time period):

- PubMed Central – www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc
- Bioline International (includes journals from Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, Ghana, India, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Turkey, Tanzania, Uganda, Venezuela) www.bioline.org.br/journals

If a full-text copy is unavailable from any of the above sources, a request can be sent by email to the corresponding author of a review.

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