Searching for the best evidence. Part 2: searching CINAHL and Medline

The first part of this editorial (July issue) described the information resources that nurses need to support their practices and other activities. This editorial will focus on 1 type of information resource—large bibliographic databases—and will describe how to harness the full potential of 2 databases (CINAHL and Medline) to identify studies that report high quality research that is ready for clinical application.

Proverbially speaking, looking for studies that are ready for clinical application is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The healthcare literature contains an abundance of research reports and studies that are in the early stages of development but few studies that are appropriate for clinical application. One estimate is that for every 5000 ideas that are initially postulated as improvements in health care, only 1 is fully evaluated and proved to be effective for changing healthcare practice. This makes effective and efficient searching of the literature even more critical.

Fortunately, articles reporting findings that are ready for clinical application can be retrieved using search strategies based on the principle of searching for studies which use the right method to answer their research question. We will briefly describe the research methodologies used in high quality studies on treatment (interventions), diagnosis (screening and assessment), prognosis, causation, as well as systematic reviews and qualitative studies described in the purpose and procedure section, and relate these to terms and phrases that can be applied for searching CINAHL and Medline. The methodologies described in articles that are ready for clinical application are unique and separate these articles from news reports, idea papers, laboratory and animal studies, early human research, and clinical research that does not use the most appropriate methodology for the question. The table summarises search methodology for all categories of problems—Medline retrieves 1 systematic review on the topic. A systematic review using the systematic review search strategy in the title— it can be used for all categories of problems—Medline retrieves 1 systematic review on the topic. A systematic review is often a better place to start looking for answers to clinical questions than original studies.

The Cochrane Library, described in the previous editorial, is another rich source of citations to randomised controlled trials. It includes more than 100 000 citations to clinical trials from Medline, CINAHL, and other bibliographic databases and handsearches of many healthcare journals. It also has a large collection of full systematic reviews done by members of the Cochrane Collaboration and a bibliographic database of other systematic reviews collected by the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York in the UK.

Diagnosis (screening and assessment)
Nurses spend considerable time assessing patients and applying the principles of screening and diagnosis, and increasingly they are responsible for describing the test and explaining results to patients. Most of the high quality studies in this category are indexed in Medline with terms related to the evaluation of diagnostic tests such as “sensitivity” and “specificity.” CINAHL indexing terms and policies reflect a more general approach and the index term “diagnosis,” when exploded (ie, when all subdivisions of the indexed term
are screened), covers most aspects of nursing assessment, screening (people with no symptoms or indications of disease), and diagnosis (people with symptoms or conditions suggestive of disease or disorders). The methodological terms for “diagnosis” are embedded within this “explosion” (i.e., “explode diagnosis” retrieves citations indexed under “sensitivities and specificities” and “predictive values of tests”).

For example, a CINAHL search to identify studies that address the question "how useful are screening and diagnostic tests for postpartum depression?" using the terms "postpartum depression" [index term] AND "explode diagnosis" [index term] retrieves 32 articles. Most deal with postpartum depression; some are only marginally related to our question, and some are not clinical studies, which probably reflects the lack of validated search strategies in CINAHL. A study by Stamp et al assessed the Modified Antenatal Screening Questionnaire that identified women in Australia who were vulnerable to becoming depressed after childbirth. It was a valuable start to developing a high quality screening instrument, but the questionnaire had relatively high rates of missing a diagnosis in women who were depressed and misdiagnosing women who were not. The authors concluded that more research is needed.

Prognosis

Prognosis research is concerned with the natural history and prognosis of a disease or condition. Natural history deals with the progression of a disease, beginning at its biological onset (when there may not be any signs or symptoms) whereas prognosis deals with the progression of disease after diagnosis. A nursing related prognosis question might be what information about prognosis might inform discussions with a woman who has an HIV positive baby? A natural history study (found in both CINAHL and Medline) done by Barnhart et al starts with infants born to mothers with HIV infection. Children were followed up until they developed the disease and died. On average, children lived to a mean age of 9.4 years but developed moderate symptoms in their second year of life. Prognosis studies are more common than natural history studies. High quality prognosis studies are usually prospective cohort studies. Search terms related to prognosis may include “incidence,” “prevalence,” “mortality,” “morbidity,” and “disease progression.”

Causation

Causation questions such as does passive smoking cause respiratory problems in children? and does hormone replacement therapy protect against Alzheimer’s disease? can be studied using several methodologies. Randomised controlled trials and cohort studies are strong methodologies, but sometimes cannot be used (eg, one cannot randomise children to experience passive smoking). Many more case control studies exist, but they are more susceptible to bias. Cross sectional studies with statistically adjusted group analysis are the most common type of causation studies, but are the weakest of the 4 study designs because data about exposure and outcome are collected simultaneously and therefore causal inferences cannot be made. Search terms in the table reflect these methodologies.

Systematic reviews

Individual primary studies from any of the categories above can be collected and analysed in a systematic review. The systematic reviews that are considered to be “evidence based” and ready for use in clinical situations must have a clearly stated purpose, a description of methods used to identify studies, and inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting studies for analysis. Strategies for retrieval of systematic reviews must include terms that gather meta-analyses plus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Research</th>
<th>Terms for searching CINAHL</th>
<th>Terms for searching Medline</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment (interventions)</td>
<td>Explode clinical trials (index term) OR random: (textword) OR research (publication type)</td>
<td>*Clinical trial (publication type) OR random: (textword) OR double-blind method (index word) OR placebo: (textword)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnosis (screening and assessment)</td>
<td>Explode diagnosis (index term)</td>
<td>*Explode sensitivity and specificity (index term) OR sensitivit: (textword) OR specificit: (textword) OR diagnosis (subheading exploded) OR diagnostic use (subheading exploded)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prognosis</td>
<td>Disease progression (index term) OR explode prospective studies (index term) OR explode mortality (index term) OR explode morbidity (index term) OR explode time factors (index term) OR explode prognosis (index term) OR prognosis (textword)</td>
<td>*Incidence (textword) OR explode mortality (index word) OR follow-up studies (index word) OR prognosis: (textword) OR predict: (textword) OR course: (textword)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causation</td>
<td>Explode prospective studies (index term) OR explode case-control studies (index term) OR explode risk factors (index term) OR risk: (textword)</td>
<td>*Explode cohort studies (index word) OR explode risk (index word) OR odds ratio: (textword) OR relative risk: (textword) OR case-control: (textword)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews and meta-analyses*</td>
<td>Meta-analysis (index term) OR meta-analysis (textword) OR metaanalysis (textword) OR MEDLINE (textword) AND [review (publication type) OR systematic review (textword)]</td>
<td>Meta-analysis (publication type) OR meta-analysis (index term) OR metaanalysis (textword) OR systematic review: (textword) OR [MEDLINE (textword) AND review (publication type)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative studies</td>
<td>Qualitative studies (index word) OR ethnographic research (index word) OR ethnourng research (index word) OR phenomenological research (index term) OR focus groups (index term) OR grounded theory (index term)</td>
<td>Nursing methodology research (index term) OR qualitative research (textword) OR grounded theory (index word) OR ethnographic: (textword)</td>
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</table>

*These search strategies have been validated using handsearches of journals. See Haynes et al. Other search strategies have not been tested and will retrieve citations with a broad range of methodological quality.

Many searching platforms exist (please see part 1 of this editorial). You will need to check your searching system to “translate” designations such as publication type and index term into the proper searching form (eg, variations in punctuation).

“*” or “~” is used to retrieve alternate endings in various systems (eg, “random” will retrieve random, randomly, randomized, and randomised in the OVID system).

“Textword” refers to words that appear in the titles and abstracts of articles.

“Explode” retrieves all the subheadings of an index term (eg, “explode sports” retrieves citations on bicycling, swimming, baseball, basketball, etc).

“Publication type” is a term assigned by database indexes to designate the form of the citation (eg, clinical trial, practice guideline).
systematic reviews that are not meta-analyses—both index words and textwords are needed because indexing is not comprehensive enough to retrieve all categories of systematic reviews.

**Qualitative studies (understanding people and situations)**

Qualitative studies are important to clinicians and researchers alike. The editors of *Evidence-Based Nursing* and other collaborators are developing quality appraisal criteria for qualitative studies. Qualitative research often involves the collection of data through observation or in-depth interviews with individuals or groups. These observations or interviews are carefully and comprehensively analysed and the results are presented in the form of understandings of the topic studied or the development of a theory. Qualitative study designs include, among others, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. The table includes suggestions for searching. Groups in the United States and Europe are working to develop retrieval techniques for these types of studies, and we will provide additional information as it becomes available.

**Conclusion**

Retrieving sound, high quality articles from CINAHL and Medline is necessary for keeping up to date. It can be a time consuming and frustrating process. Using methodology based search strategies, nurses can harness these databases to produce timely retrievals of high quality studies. The Cochrane Library is also a rich source to supplement searching in the large bibliographic databases described here.

Please give us your comments on searching. We will be happy to provide more help with information retrieval as it becomes available.

K ANN McKIBBON, MLS
Health Information Research Unit
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

SUSAN MARKS, BA, BEd

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