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Conducting a Literature Review: A process that should be familiar to nurses’?

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Background

Having worked in paediatric HIV services as a clinical nurse specialist and in research over the last decade changes in practice, based on evidence and ongoing findings, are a common occurrence. More recently an academic role has highlighted the challenges that nurses may be faced with when conducting a literature review. This short paper will highlight the importance of literature reviewing as part of the role of the nurse and provide some guidance in conducting a literature review.

Abstract

Writing and research can be challenging for nurses at undergraduate and postgraduate level, however, understanding the process and developing the skills to conduct a literature review with a staged strategy will positively affect care delivery. Nurses have a responsibility to deliver care based on the best evidence available (1) therefore developing the necessary skills to conduct a literature review is beneficial to both nurses and those in their care.

Paper

Literature reviews are performed by nurse researchers and non-researchers for a number of purposes including knowledge development, evaluation and practice development that may inform a research study or clinical practice (2). Conducting and producing a literature review is a staged process that one undertakes starting with a question or area of interest, identifying appropriate literature in the arena, reviewing that literature and reporting the findings and themes and evaluating the review. This process is the starting block of nursing research but should also be utilised to underpin and inform evidence based nursing practice; being able to develop discussion and argument on a topic is described as central to evidence based care delivery (3). There is a constant need to search for new literature and findings to maintain evidence base and knowledge ensuring the most up to date, effective care, is delivered and decisions can be rationalised. It is suggested that higher education supports nurses to search for, identify and critically discuss literature that can then inform practice (4); whether this is routine practice for nurses’ remains questionable. It is essential to utilise a library and useful to access the support and expertise of a librarian whilst conducting a literature review.

It is likely that nurses will develop their own area of interest or that practice or personal experience will produce questions that lead to a focus for a literature review. It must be noted that literature searching and reviewing findings can change or refine the research question (3).

The purpose of a literature review is to collect the relevant evidence to answer a clear, concise question (5). Once a question has been decided database searching can begin. Key words are identified from the topic area and entered in to the search bar of the database. Key words should be joined with ‘boolean terms’ such as OR, AND, NOT to improve the relevance of the search results (6). An initial search example may be Children AND HIV AND Disclosure OR Naming. Key words are adapted as the search progresses to ensure all

relevant literature is identified. Remember that spellings e.g. American spellings will change results and it may be necessary to interchange. There are numerous databases available; nurses often utilise Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and MEDLINE/Pubmed (3,5) however there are many more. The Cochrane Library should also be searched for systematic literature reviews. Filters on databases will also assist with relevance; consider changing the time frame of publication to ensure up to date literature is found, check the language of publications to ensure it is understood by the reader. In addition to journal articles it is important to consider books, publications, official reports and papers that may also inform practice decisions. It is important to present the numerical search findings including the number of articles identified, the number removed after review and the number relevant to the search that will be critically discussed (7).

Reviewing findings must be strategically managed and it is often suggested that the use of a table or index cards (3, 7) are the most appropriate way to process and prioritise articles found. A table may be simply divided into columns that include: author, year of publication, journal, title, type of study, sample number and key themes or findings. Always consider quality, validity and reliability of studies; some studies may identify their own limitations in the report (8). Colour coding literature is suggested (5) and is a personal preference to separate emerging themes that may become clear as the articles are reviewed. It is likely that some articles will have little relevance and will be removed from the review. Although a timely exercise, this is a crucial stage of the review and will inform ongoing research or practice development.

Nurses should develop skills to critique research, reports and articles (2) which are important when reviewing the search findings. The review should report an objective, critical analysis of the findings (5, 6) and should include a summary of the themes and key areas; there may be a consensus of opinion or a number of different views to present (8). It is important to identify what is known and what is not yet known (7) with relevance to your question or subject.

At times the literature review may answer your question, however, it may be that the literature review is a starting point to a research project therefore findings should lead to finalising a research question and hypothesis (5).

Conclusion

Understanding the process of conducting a literature review is an important skill for nurses so that existing knowledge can be understood and considered. Nurses today should be research active and ensure evidence based, high quality care is a priority in an ever changing arena. Developing the skills to critically analyse and discuss literature supports clinical confidence and personal and professional development.

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