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Submitter Information

Mark Pearson

Email: mark.pearson@pms.ac.uk

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Exploring search strategies for identifying barriers to and facilitators of programme delivery

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Authors:

Mark Pearson, BA, MRes, PhD, PenTAG (Peninsula Medical School) Kate Ashton, BSc, MSc, PenTAG (Peninsula Medical School) Tiffany Moxham, BA, MLIS, PenTAG (Peninsula Medical School)

Abstract:

It has been suggested that protocol-driven search strategies are of limited use for identifying evidence related to complex interventions, with some of the most important evidence being unearthed informally whilst queuing in a university café (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). In this presentation, we reflect on our experience of using a range of search strategies to identify qualitative research for a systematic review of factors that influence the successful delivery of cardiovascular disease prevention programmes: 1) A qualitative research filter applied to a protocol-driven clinical effectiveness search strategy 2) Targeted searches 3) Contacting the study authors of included programmes 4) Reference checking Of the 30 studies included in the final review, two-thirds were identified using the first of these strategies (a protocol-driven search with a qualitative research filter). The remaining one-third of the included papers were identified using alternative search strategies (targeted, suggestions by study authors, and reference checking). We found these alternative strategies to differ considerably in their contribution; in this review, contacting study authors proved to be a resource-intensive process that yielded minimal results. However, targeted searches and reference checking, whilst also resource-intensive processes, enabled us to find evidence that was not found using other strategies. Our experience suggests that whilst protocol-driven clinical effectiveness search strategies are important at the outset of a systematic review of complex interventions, they are insufficient if conducted in isolation from other (at present less methodologically-developed) search strategies. We conclude that critical reflection on the utility of implementing alternative search strategies across a range of complex interventions is vital for the development of such strategies.
