EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Helen Stringer looks at PICO questions as the basis for a literature search

Searching for evidence

“Get to know your librarian – they rank amongst the most helpful people you will meet”

Try entering ‘speech and language therapy’ into Google and in 0.28 seconds you will have 1,690,000 results. Even entering something more specific, eg ‘aphasia’ or ‘stammer’ will yield as many. So how do we find what we really want without wasting our precious time? As we saw last month, the first step is to have a specific and well-focused clinical question. For example, ‘Is a screening test as accurate as a full clinical evaluation? For language delay or disorder?’

Search terms

In order to search effectively we must use the right words in the right way. The US National Library of Medicine’s MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) is a thesaurus used for searching medical literature databases. It contains ordinary and specialist vocabulary, eg language, disorder, aphasia, adolescent. MeSH words can be combined using Boolean terms to make the search more flexible or specific. Boolean terms use everyday words, eg “AND”, “OR” and “NOT”, that a search engine treats in a consistent way. Search terms can also be grouped together with parentheses. For example, a search for language AND (delay OR disorder) will return any document that contains the word “language” and either of the words “disorder” or “delay”. Searching for (language AND disorder) OR delay will find results with language disorder or the term delay alone. Enclosing specific phrases in quotation marks will search the database for documents containing that exact phrase.

Library access and databases

Speech and language therapists working in the NHS have access to the NHS online library as well as local NHS libraries. You may be able to join your local university library and will certainly be able to use your local public library. Whatever your circumstances, get to know your librarian – they rank amongst the most helpful people you will meet. Information about papers in all academic journals is now held on web-based databases and some librarians will teach you how to do an effective database search. Although some databases are freely available (open access) some are only available through subscription, requiring an Athens or a Shibboleth password. Here, we will explore the open access resources, such as PubMed or Google Scholar.

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