



Letter to the editor:

Letter in response to A Practical Guide to Perform a Systematic Literature Review and Meta-analysis

Kirsten Elliott^{1*}

¹ Imperial College London, United Kingdom.

* Correspondence: Kirsten Elliott, k.elliott@imperial.ac.uk

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I would like to raise some concerns about a guide to conducting systematic reviews published in this journal in 2021 (Herrera Ortiz et al., 2021). The paper includes several errors with regards to recommended practices for systematic review searching.

Of particular alarm is the paragraph: “At least two independent authors must carry out the search strategy; both researchers must keep track of all the records while performing the search (Herrera Ortiz et al., 2021a; Pautasso, 2013) ... The results retrieved by both authors must be compared, and if discrepancies are present, these must be resolved by agreement or by a third author (Pautasso, 2013).”

More than one author independently carrying out searches is not recommended in any of standard sources of systematic review guidance, such as the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (Lefebvre et al., 2022). Multiple authors separately conducting a systematic review search would take an unnecessary amount of time and not add to the methodological rigour of the review. The process of resolving discrepancies between reviewers takes place at the screening stage, not in the process of finding studies.

Furthermore, the citations provided do not support the statements being made; one is an article offering guidance on literature reviews rather than systematic reviews (Pautasso, 2013), and the other is a systematic review with the same lead author as this article, and which itself has inadequately reported search methods (Herrera Ortiz et al., 2021b).

There are other errors, for example, the statement that “Researchers must build the research question based on the PICOT acronym” is incorrect – PICOT is only one of many valid research frameworks. Again, the citations provided do not support the statement – Munn in fact argues the opposite, explaining that many reviews will not fit into a PICO or PICOT framework (Munn et al., 2018).

MESH headings seem to have been equated with subject headings in the advice to use them when searching all databases – MESH headings are the subject headings used in some specific databases but are not valid in others, such as Embase.

Systematic review searching is a skill requiring methodological knowledge and expertise. Current guidance on systematic review search encourages the involvement of a librarian or information specialist. On the strength of this article, I would argue that is also necessary for any papers on the methodology of systematic reviews. The article is misleading, especially to those new to research, and should be retracted or extensively revised.

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