

Systematic Search for Guidelines: Which Information Sources are Required?

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Abstract

Introduction

Evidence-based guidelines are systematically developed decision aids for healthcare providers and patients for approaching specific health problems appropriately. If the aim of a search is to identify all guidelines on a specific topic, a systematic search by IQWiG considers online guideline databases and websites of interdisciplinary and specialist guideline providers [1]. Guideline databases represent a platform for different guideline providers and the guidelines and provider websites can be accessed via links. Interdisciplinary guideline providers publish guidelines on different medical specialties; subject-specific providers, usually individual medical societies, publish guidelines on their specialty. Other sources, such as the clinical information system Dynamed or author enquiries, can also be used.

An analysis from 2011 showed that, when searching for guidelines, a search in bibliographic databases is dispensable, as guidelines can be identified completely via guideline databases and the websites of interdisciplinary and specialist guideline providers[2].

Objective was to investigate whether a PubMed search with a newer validated guideline filter could now be useful in reducing the resources required for searching (IQWiG currently searches > 40 sources) as well as to investigate whether a combined search of different guideline databases and PubMed is sufficient to identify all guidelines on a specific topic.

Methods

With regard to information sources, we conducted a retrospective analysis of relevant guidelines from guideline synopses published between 2017 and 2020 on six different topics.

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In a first step, we checked in which sources the guidelines were originally found. In a second step, we evaluated which of the relevant guidelines were listed in PubMed and how many relevant guidelines could be found by searching PubMed using the CADTH guideline filter – broad [3], alone or in combination with guideline databases.

Results

154 relevant evidence-based guidelines were included in the guideline synopses on breast cancer, COPD, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Of the relevant guidelines, the majority (49%, 76 guidelines) were identified from websites of specialist guideline providers. Of the remaining 78, 50 (33%) were found in guideline databases, 25 (16%) on websites of multidisciplinary guideline providers, and 3 in other sources (2%).

A check in PubMed showed that 89 guidelines (58%), all identified with the search filter, were listed in PubMed. 111 guidelines (72%) were identified by combining this PubMed search with a search in the TRIP Medical Database. The best result was obtained by combining searches in PubMed, TRIP and 6 other guideline databases (AWMF, CMA, NGC, NHS, ECRI, GIN), resulting in the retrieval of 132 guidelines (86%).

Discussion

To fully identify all relevant guidelines on a specific topic, a search in guideline databases and on websites of multidisciplinary or specialty-specific guideline providers is essential. A combined search in PubMed and guideline databases cannot replace the current approach. However, if searches on websites of individual guideline providers are to be reduced and need not be comprehensive, a combined search in PubMed, TRIP and 6 guideline databases yields better results than one in PubMed and TRIP alone. We recommend the validated sensitive CADTH guideline filter – broad for PubMed searches.

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