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The PRISMA Statement: What does it mean for nurse authors, reviewers, and editors?

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Systematic reviews of the literature have become an important feature of guideline development, policy deliberation, and proposals for new research. Some journals also require or at least prefer a systematic review in the hope that more complete disclosure will reduce reporting bias and provide readers with an evidence base on which to make clinical decisions. An early attempt at standardization of the review process was the development of the QUOROM Statement (Quality Of Reporting Of Meta-analyses) as guidance for the reporting of meta-analyses. The new PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) updates the QUOROM guidance by addressing not only the meta-analysis but broadening the scope of the guideline to include the systematic review. Journals that endorse these guidelines state so clearly in their author guidelines; other journals can elect to endorse by referencing the PRISMA Statement and including the PRISMA website (www.prisma-statement.org) in their author guidelines.

The question remains: what does this mean for nurse authors, reviewers, and editors? First, a careful review of the Statement is in order. The documents are freely available as open access under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. The box at the end of this article includes all the locations where the Statement is published under this open access. It is important to download both the Statement and the accompanying explanation and elaboration. Supplementary materials include a check-list of essential items to include in a systematic review as well as a flow diagram that can be freely used by authors and researchers.

What follows here are some of my thoughts as a writer, reviewer, and editor on the importance of the PRISMA Statement and how I see it influencing the nursing literature.

For authors, these documents provide clear guidance on improving the process for conducting a systematic review that includes essential elements such as framing the objective and question to be answered in the review, developing and articulating a protocol for the methodology, assessing risk of bias in and across included or excluded studies, relating the discussion of the findings back to the original question, and clearly delineating limitations and implications for future research. The 27-item checklist along with the explanatory document provides outstanding examples of well-written statements, exemplars from published works, which address each of the items. Although PRISMA is not a recipe, the checklist is very helpful in reminding authors about all the steps involved in the process of doing a relevant and valuable systematic review.

For reviewers, the check-list of essential elements serves as a reminder of what to question and what

to expect in a manuscript report of a systematic review. Although the PRISMA committee members caution that the check-list was not designed to function as a quality assessment instrument, they do comment that reviewers might use it as a reminder of the essential elements of a systematic review. I found that the examples of how to articulate something in a concise manner for a manuscript helped me in providing comments to authors on streamlining their prose.

For editors, endorsing the PRISMA Statement could help to improve the quality of the reviews they receive and publish. One key feature I discovered was the information on structuring abstracts. Most research included in systematic reviews begins as an abstract from a journal article or a presentation. To increase the chances that research reported in nursing journals is included in systematic reviews, editors need to pay particular attention to their abstracts and assure that essential elements such as a precise statement of methods, subjects, comparison groups, and outcomes are present. Such attention to detail will increase the chances that a report is located in a systematic search.

Overall, the real purpose of the PRISMA Statement is to improve the transparency and rigor of reporting a systematic review and a meta-analysis if included. By following this guidance, nurse authors, reviewers, and editors can elevate the level of sophistication of nursing journalism and in turn, improve nursing practice with more rigorous evidence-based practice.

Citations and Access for the Complete PRISMA Statement Documents

Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 6(6): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

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