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Jessica A. Koos

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Evidence Summary

While Most Information Literacy Research Is Included in the Fields of Library Science and Education, a Considerable Amount Is Found in Medicine and Health

A Review of:

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Reviewed by:

Jessica A. Koos
Senior Assistant Librarian/Health Sciences Librarian
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York, United States of America
Email: jessica.koos@stonybrook.edu

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Abstract

Objective – To describe the published literature on information literacy from 1999-2009.

Design – Statistical descriptive analysis and content analysis.

Setting – N/A

Subjects – 1,970 publications from the Web of Science database.

Methods – The Web of Science database was searched using the term “information literacy”

in the advanced search under “topic,” and was limited to articles published from 1999-2009. Next, information such as document type, subject areas, authors, source titles, publication years, languages, countries, keywords, and abstracts was collected from each document. A statistical descriptive analysis was conducted using the data. A content analysis was performed on the keywords and abstracts from a sampling of the results.

Main Results – Information science/library science and education were the top subject areas of the identified articles, while the third largest subject area was “public, environmental and occupational health.” Nine

out of ten journal titles focused on library science, however the journal title containing the second largest number of articles was *Patient Education and Counseling*. The content analysis revealed that the most common categories for keywords were “miscellaneous,” “health and medicine,” followed by “education.”

Conclusion – The results indicated that information literacy research had been published mainly in journals associated with library science and education; however, a considerable amount of literature was published in health and medicine.

Commentary

The quality of this study was appraised using the CAT: A Generic Critical Appraisal Tool created by Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb (2014). Overall, the article was found to be of high quality based on this assessment. The research questions were clearly defined and matched the methods used. The methods were also explained with a sufficient amount of detail to allow for reproducibility. One limitation that was mentioned in the article was that since the database search was conducted in September 2009, any material published after that date was not included in the analysis. Another limitation to this study was that only the Web of Science database was used to identify articles. Although the author explained that bibliographic databases are the most effective way of searching the literature, there was no explanation as to why this specific database was chosen or why additional databases were not utilized in the study. Searching additional databases would have yielded a more complete set of results. Additionally, the analysis of keyword types in the article abstracts indicated that “miscellaneous” was the largest category. This is not very meaningful, and perhaps the coders could have provided a more thorough analysis.

It is interesting to note that the term “health literacy” is not mentioned in the article, as it is very closely related to information literacy. Health literacy can be defined as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to

obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (Ratzan and Parker, 2000). A basic topic search in Web of Science revealed 13,191 results when the phrase “health literacy” was searched. When limited to the dates of the study (1999-2009), there were 1,376 results. There were only 556 publications retrieved when searching for the phrase “information literacy” and the terms “health” or “medicine,” and only 79 results when filtered for the study dates, indicating that the potential connection between information literacy and health/medicine may be greater than indicated in this article.

The major finding of this article was that although the topic of information literacy is largely dominated by articles from the fields of library science and education, the fields of health and medicine are major producers of information literacy-related research as well. The author explained that this could be indicative of the importance of being able to navigate health information, especially since there is so much available to consumers. The author also explained that this research is possibly produced by an increasing number of health sciences librarians, who publish on this topic. Future research exploring the credentials of the authors of such articles is needed to verify this claim.

Other findings of the research included that most of the publications identified were articles, published in the U.S., and written in English. It was also found that the number of publications on this topic increased over time, implying that it had been a topic of increasing interest during the time period studied. These results verified previous findings in the field.

A growing interest in the field of health literacy, especially due to the current pandemic, highlights the importance of practitioners being aware of their patients’ capability to manage their own health and medical issues. It has been proven that poor health literacy leads to poor health outcomes (Berkman et al, 2011), and initiatives to further the development of these skills are crucial.

Library science experts are in a unique position to use their skills to contribute to these efforts.

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