

**Primer: Problems with Narrative Reviews (aka Overviews)**

<b>Definition</b>	Narrative reviews are “evidence-round ups” on specific health care topics – but ones which do not necessarily follow systematic evidence-based criteria. Systematic reviews (including meta-analyses) can be contrasted with narrative reviews – or overviews – in that they generally follow a specific set of evidence-based criteria (and yet, still require critical appraisal to determine if they have met these standards.)
<b>Key Points &amp; Problem</b>	<p>Narrative reviews often do not meet important criteria to help mitigate bias – frequently they lack explicit criteria for article selection and frequently there is no evaluation of selected articles for validity, as examples. Only rigorously applied evidence-based methods can help move toward predictability for health care outcomes.</p> <p><b>Key Problem →</b> There is high potential for low methodological quality. Authors frequently have expert opinions (and biases) and find studies to support their positions (selection bias).</p>
<b>Conclusions</b>	Review articles can be useful for summarizing the literature and providing guidance provided they are of high methodological quality. However, because many reviews are not done in a systematic way, they should not be relied upon to draw conclusions about effective care.
<b>Discussion</b>	<p>Overviews or narrative reviews are frequently published in the best medical journals. Many clinicians rely upon these reviews since they are considered a current “roundup” of evidence and are accompanied by “useful” recommendations from the (expert) author. Authors frequently have expert opinions (and biases) and find studies to support their positions (selection bias). You need to be sure the review was done using a systematic approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There may be studies showing no effect or harm which are not included in the review.</li> <li>▪ The only way to know if there has been a comprehensive search and critical appraisal of the studies in the review is to see the search strategy and criteria used for study inclusion.</li> </ul> <p>Unless you see the search strategy, criteria for selecting and accepting studies for entry into the review, the information (summary points, conclusions) contained in the review may be invalid. Caution is urged in using any reviews except valid systematic reviews.</p> <p><b>Criteria →</b> If you are looking at a review article that does not pass these criteria you are likely to be wasting your time and drawing invalid conclusions about the best clinical approach (you can get our <b>Systematic Review Appraisal Tool</b> online at our Website.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Was there an attempt to obtain all relevant studies for the review?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the review state inclusion/exclusion criteria for the studies?</li> <li>▪ Do the criteria address study type, methods, the population studied, intervention and outcomes?</li> <li>▪ Were the studies adequately evaluated for internal and external validity?                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Population</li> <li>○ Study type</li> <li>○ Study Methods = Method of randomization • Blinded assessment • Outcomes (benefits, harms and risks) • Loss to follow-up • ITT analysis</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Is there a statement or chart rating/summarizing study quality?</li> <li>▪ Were there several reviewers who agreed on study validity?</li> <li>▪ Was there a summary/synthesis of the evidence?</li> <li>▪ Quantitative summaries (meta-analysis) may not be possible in some cases because of study heterogeneity. However, systematic reviews may still be able to weight the best studies, e.g., by validity, sample size.</li> </ul> <p><b>It is important to favor valid systematic reviews that utilize Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs).</b></p>