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Musculoskeletal

Abstract vs. full text inconsistencies in LBP reviews

Can we be sure that the message is the same?

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This review found that 80% of low back pain (LBP) systematic review abstracts contained some form of spin, which was not associated with the type of conclusion.

More specifically, abstracts of non-Cochrane reviews showed only moderate to fair agreement with the full text. Cochrane reviews, on the contrary, showed substantial to almost perfect agreement with the full text.

The authors conclude that the abstracts of low back pain systematic reviews require improvement.

Systematic reviews are regarded as reliable sources of information to guide clinical decisions. Because readers are sometimes only able to access the abstract, it is critical that this accurately represents the full text content and that it is free of spin.

Spin can include selective presentation of outcomes, reporting a positive effect not supported by the findings, and excessive generalisation of results. Although there is a large number of systematic reviews related to LBP, it is unclear how accurately the abstract contents correspond to those of the full text.

A total of 66 systematic reviews (9 Cochrane and 57 non-Cochrane) retrieved from the PEDro database were included. Review quality was assessed using the AMSTAR-2 tool, while the presence of spin or inconsistencies with the full text was determined through checklists.

Overall, the findings suggested that Cochrane review abstracts contain less spin and are much more consistent with the full text than non-Cochrane review abstracts. Study quality ranged from high to critically low.

The authors therefore make three sets of recommendations:

1. readers should aim to look beyond the abstract;
2. editors and peer reviewers should enforce the use of checklists (e.g., PRISMA) to ensure the quality of the text;
3. authors should write the abstract only after the full text is finished and focus on making it an accurate representation of what was found.

Expert opinion

“Sixty percent of the time it works… every time” - or is it 80% after all? It is striking that such a high number of the abstracts of LBP systematic reviews, which are at the top of the scientific evidence pyramid, are not an accurate representation of the review’s actual findings.

On the bright side, it can be seen as one more incentive to maintain a critical perspective in the face of any presented evidence and to always try to not just skim through the abstract and draw immediate conclusions. As hard as it may be - whether it’s because of perceived lack of time or insufficient research skills - this review shows us the importance of making that extra effort.

Finally, it would be interesting to find why spin and inconsistencies were present in the abstracts: is it lack of writing skills by the authors, or purposely putting the shinier results on the big print and the real findings on the small print? Remember: “There are three types of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics”

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