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Why do a literature review in health and social care?

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What is a literature review?

Let’s begin by defining what a literature review is. In short, a literature review is the comprehensive study and interpretation of literature that relates to a particular topic. When you undertake a literature review,
you identify a research question then seek to answer this question by searching for and analysing relevant literature using a systematic approach. This review then leads you to the development of new insights that are only possible when each piece of relevant information is seen in the context of other information. If you think of one piece of literature as one part of a jigsaw, then you can see how a review of the literature is like the whole completed jigsaw. This is why they are so useful.

Why are literature reviews important?

Literature reviews are important because they seek to summarize the literature that is available on any one topic. They make sense of a body of research and present an analysis of the available literature so that the reader does not have to access each individual research report included in the review. This is important because there is an increasing amount of literature available to health and social care professionals, who cannot be expected to read and assimilate all the information on any one topic. Everyone who works within health and social care has a professional duty to be up to date with recent developments and research that informs their practice. Yet, it is virtually impossible for any one practitioner to assimilate, process and decide how to implement all this information in their professional lives. This is why literature reviews, in which all the research about a particular topic is brought together, are so useful. It also explains why if a practitioner reads only one report on a topic, they are likely to get a misleading picture. Take for example the paper published in \textit{The Lancet} that sparked the debate about the safety about the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination (MMR).

One piece of evidence is only ever one piece of a larger jigsaw

In 1998, Professor Wakefield and colleagues published an article in \textit{The Lancet} suggesting that there was a possibility of a link between the vaccination, autism and bowel disorders. This hugely controversial publication, whose interpretation of the findings was later retracted by most of the authors, was based on a small case study of just 12 children. These children had attended Wakefield’s hospital with the aforementioned conditions and who had also had the vaccination.
Wakefield stated that there were possible environmental triggers to the development of autism in these children, but without controls this was very uncertain. Indeed this paper has now been retracted by the journal.

It is easy to identify from the basic facts presented in the example above that the evidence conveyed by this paper is not strong. There was a very small number of children and no control group. However, seen in isolation, this report sparked alarm in both media and medical circles alike. Newspaper headlines led the public to believe that the link between the vaccination and bowel disease and autism to be more certain than Wakefield’s report concluded. In addition, there is evidence that many health care professionals felt less confident in recommending the vaccination to parents than they had done before the release of the paper (Petrovic et al. 2001). The effect of the adverse publicity surrounding the MMR vaccination that resulted from the publication of this paper is associated with a drastic effect on vaccination rates in the United Kingdom. Prior to the publication of the paper, vaccination rates had been in excess of 90 per cent. Yet Asaria and MacMahon (2006) report that following the publication of Wakefield’s paper, as many as 44 per cent of preschool children and 22 per cent of primary school children were unvaccinated in one area of London. As the vaccination rate dropped, the effectiveness of ‘herd immunity’ was reduced, leading to the reappearance of measles that had previously been almost eradicated. Asaria and MacMahon (2006) report 449 confirmed cases of measles in the United Kingdom to the end of May 2006 and the first death since 1992. The effect of this publicity is not restricted to the United Kingdom. Many studies worldwide report an increase in the rate of measles infection, such as Bernard et al. (2007) who report from Bavaria.

There will always be pieces of literature that do not quite seem to fit together with the main body of research. That is why it is important to assess the value and contribution of any one article in the light of other articles that address the same topic in a literature review, rather than to make a conclusion from the findings of one paper that you read. The findings of single research papers are not enough – or should not be enough – to influence practice. You need to see how all the studies on a topic fit together in order to see the whole picture.

You can see the need for an adequate evidence base that is reviewed and presented in a systematic way, so that an academic judgement can be made about the links postulated by the authors rather than a judgement made on one small piece of published information. This is why literature reviews are so important.
Literature reviews present the whole jigsaw

In order to see the real effect of the MMR vaccination, further studies were needed and these needed to be systematically reviewed. This is indeed what happened following the publication of Wakefield’s paper. Much research was commissioned in order to explore the possibility of a link between the MMR vaccination and autism/bowel disease. Studies were carried out in many countries and gradually more pieces of evidence were added to the jigsaw. Individual studies were published. These were then brought together and systematically reviewed so that the results from each one could be viewed together as a whole (Demicelli et al. 2006). As the results from further studies became available and the bigger picture emerged, no evidence was found to confirm the link speculated upon by Wakefield and the fears raised in this early report were not substantiated.

The MMR controversy provides one clear example as to why it is important to review all the evidence together and how one piece of information can give a misleading picture. Without the comprehensive review of the literature that followed Wakefield’s paper, the concerns expressed in his initial paper could not have been refuted. This illustrates the value of a literature review.

Analysis of many papers can lead to new discoveries

Another reason why literature reviews are so important is that new insights can be developed by re-analysing the results of the studies themselves. In the example given above, you can see how a literature review, undertaken in a comprehensive and rigorous manner was able to identify the real risks of the MMR vaccination. Anderson et al. (2009) conducted a systematic review exploring the role of breast-feeding in the prevention of allergies in babies and young children. This was done by searching for all studies on the topic and then by comparing the findings of one study with the findings of others.

Sometimes it is possible to compare the studies in more detail, by combining the statistical data from many smaller studies and re-analysing the data as if it was one larger study. This enables researchers to see the
full impact of many studies combined together, which, read in isolation, may not seem that significant. This process of combining the statistical results of many studies, where it is appropriate to do so, is known as **meta-analysis**. The process of meta-analysis is referred to in Chapter 5 and it is worth pointing out that it is not likely to be a method engaged with at undergraduate level. However, it is the principle here that is important and provides another good reason why literature reviews undertaken in this way are so useful. Undertaking a meta-analysis, or review of the results of relevant studies has enabled researchers to establish a pattern in treatment effect that would not be apparent from reading studies in isolation.

This was especially important in the development of the evidence base for the use of the drug Streptokinase in the treatment of myocardial infarction, which is now recognized to have saved many lives. Mulrow (1994) discusses how in the 1970s, 33 small clinical trials were undertaken to compare the use of Streptokinase versus a placebo (dummy drug) in the treatment of myocardial infarction. These trials were all carried out independently and due to the small size of each trial, most did not find conclusive results in favour of the use of Streptokinase. However, these 33 trials were subsequently brought together and reviewed systematically. The results were subjected to a meta-analysis in which all the results were pooled and re-analysed. The combined results demonstrated clearly the beneficial effect of Streptokinase and as a result the drug became part of the standard treatment plan following myocardial infarction, thereby revolutionizing care. This review emphasized the importance of reviewing the literature systematically and the limitations of relying on any one piece of evidence. Furthermore, Mulrow (1994) identified that had this review been carried out 20 years earlier, many more lives could have been saved because evidence of effectiveness would have been available earlier.

**The importance of a comprehensive or systematic approach**

You can see why a literature review is so important. The next point to make is that a review must be undertaken in a comprehensive, rigorous
and systematic manner otherwise the results and conclusions of the review may not be reliable.

The following example illustrates this point. Take, for example, the work of Linus Pauling (1986), the world accredited scientist, who wrote a book entitled *How to Live Longer and feel Better*. In this book he quoted from a selection of articles that supported his opinion that vitamin C contains properties that are effective against the common cold. This book makes an interesting and convincing read. You have probably heard many people espouse the virtues of vitamin C for a variety of ailments. At first glance, Pauling’s book might look like a literature review. He cites various studies and authors and all point to the positive benefits of vitamin C. However, the arguments presented in the book were challenged some years later by Professor Knipschild (1994), who undertook a systematic review of all the evidence surrounding the effectiveness of vitamin C and came to very different conclusions. He argued that Pauling had not looked systematically at all the research and had only selected articles that supported his view, while apparently ignoring those that did not. Knipschild argued that Pauling had not undertaken a comprehensive, rigorous or systematic approach in his review of the evidence surrounding vitamin C. This example illustrates why such a rigorous approach is so important as without it, your review is likely to be biased. This also explains why, when you read a report by an expert in a particular area, you should remember that his or her report represents just an expert view that might not be substantiated by evidence. This is why ‘expert’ opinion is generally not considered to be a strong form of evidence.

In summary, literature reviews are important in health and social care because they enable information and research about health and social care to be viewed within its particular context and set amid other similar information and research, so that its impact can be evaluated systematically. Reviewing the literature provides a complete picture, which remains partially hidden when a single piece of research or other information is viewed in isolation. You will have also identified that those undertaking a literature review must follow a set format, or set of principles, in order to ensure that their review is comprehensive, rather than a selection of articles that have been ‘cherry-picked’ to reinforce the argument they wish to make. This is why all literature reviews undertaken for an academic award or with the aim of influencing practice should be undertaken using a systematic approach.
Why is there so much available information?

The amount of information available to all health and social care professionals is vast and expands on a daily basis. Every day there are media headlines, reports from conferences, reports of research from scientific journals, expert opinion followed by an opposing expert opinion. There are many reasons for this increase in information available to professionals. It is partly due to the increase in information technology that has led to the increasing availability of information from online journals and other websites offering information about health and social care. However, the main reason for the increase in information available within this field stems from the recent emphasis on evidence-based practice (EBP), which has led to the increasing demand for research evidence upon which practice decisions should be based.

Evidence-based practice

EBP has been described as a new paradigm within health and social care that has gradually emerged since the 1970s. At around this time, research into health and social care gained momentum and the need to get this research into practice was recognized. Practitioners increasingly questioned their practice and searched for a scientific rationale for the care they delivered, which previously might have been given according to tradition and experience. As more and more research was carried out and the body of evidence within health and social care expanded, so did the need to apply this research into practice.

The term ‘evidence-based practice (EBP)’ is used to refer to the appropriate application of this research knowledge to practice. EBP has been described as the ‘conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients’ (Sackett et al. 1996, p. 71).

EBP involves identifying a practical question to answer and then seeking for and evaluating evidence in order to answer this question. One example of a question might be: ‘Is there any evidence for the need of an all graduate nursing profession?’ The research evidence about the effectiveness and appropriateness of an all graduate nursing workforce is searched for. The validity or quality of that evidence is assessed and critiqued. Finally, this evidence should be applied to the context in which it is
relevant; in this case in determining policy regarding nurse preparation. Another example might be: ‘What is the evidence for removing a child at risk from his or her own home?’ The research evidence that has focused on outcomes for children at risk who have been removed from their homes, or who have remained in their homes, is then reviewed and the quality of that evidence is assessed. Finally, this evidence should be applied by those who make decisions about child welfare.

You will immediately see that sometimes this evidence can be difficult to interpret. A research study undertaken on one group of patients or clients may not be applicable to another. What is appropriate care for one child will not be the same as for another. However, you will also see that it is far better to use the evidence that we have than to ignore it. We cannot rely on ‘gut feel’ or past experience alone when important decisions are being made. It is clear that evidence plays a vital role in determining best practice and hence in promoting evidence-based practice. However, evidence alone is rarely enough, as the above examples illustrate. An evidence-based practice approach requires that we draw on professional judgement and consider patient/client preference, in addition to the findings from research evidence (Aveyard and Sharp 2009).

You can now see where a literature review fits into the evidence-based practice model. A comprehensive and competently carried out literature review, which draws together all the research and other information on a topic, gives a clear picture of all the relevant studies and hence provides stronger evidence. This enables the practitioner to apply his or her professional judgement to a body of research evidence rather than to rely on one or two individual studies. This is EBP in practice!

**Why does one piece of research often contradict another?**

It often seems to be the case that a piece of research is published one month that contradicts the findings of a piece of research published the month before.

For example, one week working mothers are told that preschool care benefits their child and the next they are told that it is better for the
child to stay at home. There is often then an outcry – people are confused by the differing messages conveyed and wonder why the results can vary so much.

This can be due to the media portrayal of the research in which a complex set of results is reduced to a simplified message. However, it is also due to the fact that any one individual piece of research, or indeed any single piece of health care information, is like just one part of a large jigsaw. It does not represent the whole picture – it represents merely a section of that picture and needs to be set in the context of other information. An individual piece of health or social care information, taken in isolation, does not necessarily help the reader to achieve a better understanding of the bigger picture towards which the information contributes. There are many reasons for this. For example, the research might have been undertaken in a specific area of practice or with a specific group of people, or sample, and is not generalizable to other areas. Alternatively, there might be flaws in the research design that affect its overall validity. Therefore, when you read a report that seems to conflict with a report you read the previous week and are uncertain as to which one you should consider the most reliable, it is important to consider the merits of each individual report and to remember that each single piece of research contributes just part of the bigger picture and should not be viewed in isolation. This is why literature reviews are so important in health and social care, because they enable the reader to view one piece of research within the context of others.

The importance of a systematic approach to the literature review

The literature review is a vital tool because it provides a synthesis of research and information on a particular topic. It has already been mentioned that it is important that the review is approached in a systematic manner so that all the available information is incorporated into the review. When you read literature reviews, you will discover that some are undertaken in more detail than others. The most detailed type of literature review is often referred to as a systematic review.
The systematic review

In its most detailed form, a systematic review strives to identify comprehensively and track down all the available literature on a topic, while describing a clear, comprehensive methodology. Systematic reviews have been defined as ‘concise summaries of the best available evidence that address sharply defined clinical questions’ (Mulrow et al. 1997, p. 389). The most well-known method for conducting a systematic review is produced by the Cochrane Collaboration. The Cochrane Collaboration was established in 1993 and is a large international organization whose purpose is to provide independent systematically produced reviews about the effectiveness of health care interventions. The Cochrane Collaboration provides detailed guidance about how to undertake the review.

One of the main features of a systematic review is that reviewers follow a strict protocol to ensure that the review process undertaken is systematic by using explicit and rigorous methods to identify, critically appraise and synthesize relevant studies in order to answer a predefined question. The reviewers then develop a comprehensive searching strategy, leaving no stone unturned in the search for relevant literature, and do not regard the process complete until the search is exhausted. For example, reviewers search for unpublished research and might talk to researchers about unpublished data or articles not accepted for publication, in addition to published data on the topic in question. The reason for this is that there is evidence that a publication bias exists; that results, which show clear benefit of an intervention, are more likely to be published than those that do not. Thus using only published data could bias the result of the review. Reviewers then develop inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to assess which information they retrieve should be incorporated into the review and to ensure that only those papers that are relevant to the question(s) addressed by the literature review are included. The reviewers then critique the selected papers according to predetermined criteria in order to assess the quality or validity of the research identified. Studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria are excluded from the review. This is to ensure that only high-quality papers that are relevant to the literature review question are included. The results of research that has been poorly carried out are likely to be less reliable and may bias the findings of the review. Finally, the findings of all the papers that are identified and incorporated for the review are pulled together and combined using a systematic approach. For example, a meta-analysis might be undertaken if the results of the
research included in the review are reported using statistics, or a meta-
ethnography can be undertaken if the results of the research included
are mainly qualitative. This enables new insights to be drawn from the
summary of the papers that were not available before.

The methods of undertaking a systematic review are rigorous and
time-consuming. The production of a systematic review usually requires
the dedication and effort of a team of experienced researchers over a
period of time. Because of the comprehensive nature of the searching
strategy, critique and synthesis of the literature, a systematic review
undertaken in the detail required by the Cochrane Collaboration is
usually considered to be the most detailed and robust form of review
that exists.

For example, in the United Kingdom they are used in the formulation of
guidelines for the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
(NICE), whose recommendations for clinical practice are based on
the best available evidence. Given the rigorous nature of Cochrane
Collaboration systematic reviews, undertaking a review in this amount
of detail is beyond the means and timescales of many researchers,
especially novice researchers.

**Less detailed systematic reviews**

Even if the stringent requirements of a Cochrane Collaboration-style
systematic review may not be within the capacity of a novice researcher,
it is still possible – and indeed necessary – to undertake a ‘systematic
approach’ to reviewing the literature. The term ‘systematic review’ is
used by the Cochrane Collaboration to describe the reviews they pro-
duce that are carried out according to strict protocol. However, a litera-
ture review can be approached in a systematic manner even if the detail
required by the Cochrane Collaboration is not attained. While the term
‘systematic review’ is often used to refer to reviews undertaken according
to the Cochrane Collaboration method of reviewing, there is no reason
why this term cannot refer to a review of the literature that has been
undertaken using a systematic approach, but which is less rigorous and
detailed than the methods described above. This means there can be
some confusion concerning the meaning of a systematic review. One
reader might interpret the term systematic review to mean nothing less than a review conducted using the methods advocated by the Cochrane Collaboration approach, while another reader might accept that a systematic review incorporates a systematic approach but may not reach the same exacting standards.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students who are undertaking a literature review for their dissertation would not normally be expected to achieve a systematic review of the standard required by the Cochrane Collaboration. They would, however, be expected to apply the general principles and guidelines of this approach to produce a literature review that used a systematic approach in the search for critique and synthesis of the literature. There is no place in health and social care for an ‘unsystematic’ review. For those new to literature reviewing, it is possible – indeed essential – to achieve a systematic approach to reviewing the literature, otherwise there can be no assurance that the review has been undertaken in a rigorous manner. If a literature review is to be submitted for an academic degree, the method undertaken to review the literature should always be systematic.

Narrative reviews

It is generally accepted that a Cochrane Collaboration systematic review offers the most robust form of evidence for health and social care professionals. As we have seen, not all reviews are conducted to this level; however, all good reviews will be conducted in a systematic manner. A literature review can incorporate a systematic approach but not in the amount of detail as described in the previous section. This approach would be expected of all those submitting a literature review as a component for an academic degree. At the other end of the spectrum there are literature reviews that are undertaken with no defined method or systematic approach. These are often referred to as narrative reviews. However, sometimes the term ‘narrative review’ is used to refer to literature reviews that are undertaken systematically but yet fall short of the rigour applied to a Cochrane systematic review. So beware the terminology used!
For our purposes, we will refer to a narrative review as one in which there is no defined method of searching for or appraising literature. When you come across a literature review, what is important is that you look at the method by which it has been carried out. This should be clearly stated in the methods section of the paper in which the review is written up. If a literature review does not have a well-described section in which it is clear that the researchers undertook a systematic approach to the literature review process, then you should be concerned about the quality and reliability of the findings produced. There is general concern that poorly carried out reviews do not produce reliable evidence. The lack of a systematic approach to a narrative review is described by Greenhalgh (1997), who makes reference to essays written by medical students who may ‘browse through the indexes of books and journals until [they] came across a paragraph that looked relevant and copied it out. If anything did not fit in with the theory [they] were proposing [they] left it out’ (p. 672; my italic).

A poorly carried out review is one that does not use specific identified methods for searching for, critiquing and synthesizing the literature. Instead, the methods used are undefined and only a small selection of available literature may be incorporated in the review, which may or may not have been appraised (Hek et al. 2000). While some individual research papers that are relevant to the review question may be identified, if the search is not systematic, other papers may not be identified. The research papers that are identified are then not set in their context but remain like single pieces of a jigsaw. Furthermore, in a narrative review, there is often no clear statement about which studies to include in a review and how these should be critiqued. This may lead to a biased and one-sided review of the literature that is not comprehensive. Consequently, the conclusions drawn may be inaccurate.

A narrative review might be no more than a collection of research papers and other information about a given topic. In a systematic review, pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria are set that determine the relevance of each study identified. In a narrative review, these standards are not defined and any literature might be included without justification or rationale. There is not a clear indication as to how the review was conducted and therefore the review is not repeatable. The reader of the
review is unclear how much relative importance should be attached to each individual research report included, as its merits are not discussed.

Why you should be doing a ‘systematic’ rather than a ‘narrative’ review

It is easy to see that these ‘traditional’ or narrative reviews have a number of biases and why you should not normally be doing one as part of an academic study. There is normally the personal bias of the author(s), a bias in the selection of included material and with no clear methodology they cannot be reproduced independently, so conclusions cannot be verified easily and may be misleading. The example given earlier about the evidence for the use of vitamin C illustrates this point. Professor Knipschild challenged the findings presented in a narrative style review when he undertook a more systematic approach to a review on the same topic. There is no place for a narrative review in health and social care.

The danger of an unsystematic approach: it can lead to misleading conclusions because a comprehensive search for and critique of literature is not undertaken.

While it is acknowledged that a fully systematic approach is beyond the scope of most novice researchers, the narrative review is not a strategy that should be resorted to. Some of the first researchers to raise concerns about the quality of the narrative review were Mulrow et al. in 1997, who criticized the lack of rigour with which many reviews were carried out. Mulrow et al. (1997) examined 50 literature reviews published in four major medical journals and identified that 49 had no statement of the methods used and 47 had inappropriate summaries of the information included. They concluded that, at that time, medical reviews did not routinely use scientific methods to identify, assess and synthesize information. This is why there has been so much recent focus on the quality of reviews that are undertaken in a systematic manner.

The main differences between a narrative and a systematic review are summarized below:
The literature review as a research methodology

It is important to remember that a literature review that is carried out systematically is a research methodology in its own right. Your review will have a defined research question and you will follow a systematic approach to answering that question. Even if you are not undertaking a Cochrane-style systematic review, you need to follow a systematic process when you are undertaking your review and you will need to document this process very clearly when you come to write up your review. It is important that you document clearly how you undertook the steps you have taken. The reader needs to know that you undertook a comprehensive and systematic approach to your literature review and the only way to determine this is to give a full account of your literature review process. If you do not document a process that was undertaken, the reader will be given the impression that this process was not undertaken.
There should be a clearly defined section detailing the methods used to address the question. The methods section will usually commence with how you identified your research question. Discuss the rationale for your research question and explore its origins. You can draw on related literature at this point. Remember also to justify your use of a literature review as your chosen research methodology. Why did you not choose another research methodology, such as one involving primary data collection? You should then document how you searched for appropriate literature. You are advised to include a report of the search terms you used and your search strategy. You should then document how this literature was critiqued and justify your choice of critical appraisal tools. Finally, you need to document how you brought this information together. Present information in a graph or chart if this is appropriate. Overall, your methods section will contribute a large portion of the overall review and is likely to amount to approximately one-fifth to one-quarter of the overall word count.

Finally, your literature review is likely to contain the following components:

- a clearly defined research question
- a clearly documented methods section
- a clear presentation and analysis of the results of your literature search. Relevant literature might include primary research reports, books, discussion articles and other published information. The literature is analysed in order to shed new light on the topic question.
- a final discussion section, in which you make conclusions and give recommendations based on the findings.

Can I undertake a literature review for my dissertation?

Yes. This book is specifically directed towards students of health and social care who may be undertaking a literature review for the first time when they undertake their dissertation, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level. A literature review is particularly suitable for undergraduate or postgraduate students because you can undertake your review from sources that are already published and easily accessible. Undertaking a literature review does not require the formal approval of a research ethics committee, which can be a lengthy process. Students who are
undertaking primary data collection (for example, interviews or questionnaires) have to submit a research proposal to their local research ethics committee, and often other regulatory bodies, for approval before they can collect their data. This process seeks to promote the safety of participants who are involved in research. The student who is undertaking a literature review is not required to obtain ethics approval prior to undertaking a review. This is because the reviewer collects data in the form of published material that relates to the research topic and then undertakes to critique and analyse the literature. The reviewer does not have direct access to those who participated in the original research and hence is exempt from seeking the approval of an ethics committee. If you are undertaking a literature review as the dissertation component of your degree, this clearly meets the requirements for a dissertation.

While there are many approaches to and types of dissertation, there is widespread agreement that a dissertation should meet the following criteria:

• A dissertation should be an independent and self-directed piece of academic work.
• It should offer detailed and original argument in the exploration of a specific research question.
• It should offer clarity as to how the question is answered.

A literature review meets the above criteria because a review should always commence with a research question, which is then addressed in a systematic way. It should be clearly evident that the results of the review arise from the methods used to undertake the study. The aim of a literature review is to uncover new insights on a topic by reviewing the literature in a systematic way.

This might sound an onerous task but it should not be. If you undertake your review in a systematic and comprehensive manner, you will bring together literature that sheds new light on your topic. This is not intended to sound like a daunting prospect but rather will be the result of your inquiry. Without the process of bringing together individual pieces of information to complete the jigsaw, an individual research study or other information stands alone and its real impact and relevance cannot be judged. The researcher who completes a literature review is moving from the known (the individual pieces of research and other information) towards the unknown (combining the results of the different information to reach new insights on a topic).
You should be starting to see how and why literature reviews are such an essential tool for health and social care professionals. First and foremost, they enable us to gain a comprehensive overview and summary of the available information on a particular topic. Literature reviews are generally more useful to the health and social care practitioner than any one individual piece of research because they allow one piece of research to be viewed within the wider context of others. The process of undertaking a literature review has also been introduced in this chapter. Emphasis has been placed on the importance of the literature review as a research method in its own right and its relevance as a research methodology for an undergraduate or postgraduate dissertation. We have also discussed the need to review the literature using a systematic approach in order to achieve an understanding of the body of literature as a whole in relation to a particular research. As a general rule, when you set out to review the literature, you should aim to undertake a systematic approach as outlined in this chapter, irrespective of whether it is feasible to achieve the detail in the review as required by the Cochrane Collaboration, for example. You can then see that if you undertake a literature review for your dissertation or research project then you are contributing to the development of knowledge in your area.

Key points

- Literature reviews are an essential tool for those who work in health and social care in order to make sense of the range of information that may be published on any given topic.
- The literature review process is a research methodology in its own right and should commence with a research question, followed by a research design, presentation of results and finally, a discussion of the results.
- The literature review process can and should be approached systematically when undertaken by a novice researcher.