Guidance on the Conduct of Narrative Synthesis in Systematic Reviews: A Product from the ESRC Methods Programme

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Do domestic smoke alarms save lives? Can young offenders be 'scared straight' through tough penal measures? What factors should be considered when designing and implementing a multi-sectoral injury prevention programme in a local area? Making sense of large bodies of evidence drawn from research using a range of methods is a challenge. Ensuring that the product of this synthesis process can be trusted is important for policy makers, for practitioners and for the people research is intended to benefit.

There are a number of ways in which research evidence can be brought together to give an overall picture of current knowledge that can be used to inform policy and practice decisions. However, the trustworthiness of some of these methods remains problematic. This guidance, produced with a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Methods Programme funding, focuses on a particular approach - **narrative synthesis.** Variants of this approach are widely used in work on evidence synthesis, including Cochrane reviews, but there is currently no consensus on the constituent elements of narrative synthesis and the conditions for establishing trustworthiness – notably a systematic and transparent approach to the synthesis process with safeguards in place to avoid bias resulting from the undue emphasis on one study relative to another – are frequently absent. This guidance therefore aims to contribute to improving the quality of narrative approaches to evidence synthesis.

Narrative' synthesis (NS) as used in the guidance, refers to an approach to the systematic review and synthesis of findings from multiple studies that relies primarily on the use of words and text to summarise and explain the findings of the synthesis. Whilst it can involve the manipulation of statistical data, the defining characteristic is that it adopts a textual approach to the process of synthesis to 'tell the story' of the findings from the included studies. NS can be used to synthesise evidence focusing on a wide range of questions, not only those relating to the effectiveness of a particular intervention. It is part of a larger review process that includes a systematic approach to searching for and quality appraising research based evidence as well as the synthesis of this evidence but the guidance does not provide advice on these other elements of a systematic review.

The guidance provides an over-arching framework to guide the conduct of a narrative synthesis and describes specific tools and techniques that can be used in this process. For practical reasons, the guidance is focused on the conduct of the two types of systematic review which have particular salience for those who want their work to inform policy and practice: reviews addressing questions concerned with the *effects* of interventions and those concerned with the *implementation* of interventions shown to be effective in experimental settings. Two demonstration syntheses are also included to illustrate how the guidance can be used to inform decisions about which specific tools and techniques to use in the context of a particular review. the guidance also includes an extensive methodological bibliography.

The guidance is intended to be accessible to a range of people involved in systematic reviewing. However, whilst users of the guidance will not need to be systematic review experts, they will need a reasonable level of research literacy and users without experience of systematic review work should collaborate with more experienced colleagues.

For more information and to obtain the full guidance document go to:
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/shm/research/nssr/research/dissemination/publications.php