Practice guidelines: a piece of the quality puzzle*

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The National Library of Medicine (NLM) librarians provided support to the first thirteen panels sponsored by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research by conducting literature searches, providing document delivery, and preparing bibliographic databases. Since then, NLM has moved into a consulting role, helping panels link up with local members of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine. NLM staff members have also prepared several documents useful to the development and dissemination of practice guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Practice guidelines are known by a variety of terms, including practice parameters, clinical criteria, clinical protocols, clinical algorithms, and practice standards, among others. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) defines practice guidelines as "a set of directions or principles to assist the health care practitioner with patient care decisions about appropriate diagnostic, therapeutic, or other clinical procedures for specific clinical circumstances" [1]. Guidelines may be developed by public or private organizations, institutions, or expert panels. Practice guidelines go hand-in-hand with the concepts of continuous quality improvement or total quality management, because they are designed to assist with decision making, not replace it. The goal is to provide information critical to improving quality, effectiveness, and appropriateness of care. One of the major objectives of NLM's National Information Center on Health Services Research and Health Care Technology (NICHSR) is to support both the development and dissemination of practice guidelines.

DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Since 1990, NLM has been supporting panels sponsored by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) charged with developing practice guidelines. These panels include six that have released their guidelines on acute pain, urinary incontinence, preventing pressure ulcers, cataracts, depression, and sickle cell disease [2–8]. Other panels are developing guidelines on cancer pain, treating pressure ulcers, HIV, benign prostatic hyperplasia, low-back problems, mammography, Alzheimer's disease, otitis media, heart failure, post-stroke rehabilitation, unstable angina, cardiac rehabilitation, and smoking cessation.

NLM librarians developed search strategies, conducted literature searches, prepared bibliographic databases, and provided document delivery for the first thirteen AHCPR-sponsored guideline panels. Since 1993, NLM has moved into a consulting role, helping panels link up with local National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) member libraries to obtain the bulk of these services.

NLM staff members also have prepared several documents useful to the development and dissemination of practice guidelines. These documents include a manual on practice guideline literature search methods, a bibliography of practice guidelines for January 1985 through December 1992, a bibliography on the techniques of meta-analysis, and a guide to sources of literature useful for health services research [9–12]. The latter three publications are available from NLM's Publications server† through file transfer protocol (FTP), as well as in print format.

† To access NLM documents at no cost over the Internet, FTP to NLMPUBS.NLM.NIH.GOV and log in as NLMPUBS. The "index" file in each directory provides information about the files in that directory.

DISSEMINATION OF PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Vocabulary

To improve the way practice guidelines and related literature are indexed and retrieved in the MEDLARS® databases, NLM added a number of relevant publication types to the MeSH vocabulary from 1991 to 1993. These include “CLINICAL TRIAL” (Phases I-IV), “GUIDELINE,” “META-ANALYSIS,” “PRACTICE GUIDELINE,” and “RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL.” Figure 1 shows the number of bibliographic records in various NLM databases for selected publication types as of December 1993.

Also by 1993, MeSH included descriptors for "GUIDELINES," "PRACTICE GUIDELINES," and all of the topic areas under consideration by the AHCPR-sponsored guideline panels and patient outcome research teams (PORTs). Figure 2 shows the number of bibliographic records in various NLM databases for the MeSH heading "PRACTICE GUIDELINES" and related topics as of December 1993.

NLM collection and MEDLARS databases

NLM also is expanding its collection of practice guidelines. In 1991/92, the staff reviewed more than 2,000 guideline-related items published prior to 1991 that were supplied by AHCPR and others to identify relevant materials not in the collection. Items not already in the collection were indexed; records for practice guidelines already described in MEDLARS files were updated to add the “PRACTICE GUIDELINE” publication type.

Practice guidelines are being added to the NLM collection and databases according to the policies set forth in NLM’s recently revised collection development manual [13]. NLM comprehensively collects the following types of guidelines: practice guidelines; official U.S. standards related to health care technology, biomedical research and development, and health care; standards and guidelines issued by the World Health Organization; and other influential or widely recognized standards.

Prototype system

A prototype practice guidelines Full-Text Retrieval System has been developed by NLM and is undergoing testing by medical librarians and end users. The prototype system offers many features for accessing full-text documents, including network dial-up access for character-based terminals, Internet access, table-of-contents browsing, and natural-language query capability. In addition to AHCPR-sponsored clinical practice guidelines, the system also contains the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force’s Guide to Clinical Preventive Services and all of the National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference Reports from 1977 to the present.

Structured abstracts

NLM has encouraged the use of structured, or highly informative, abstracts in medical journals as a means of helping clinicians identify pertinent and methodologically sound studies [14]. NLM also assisted in the recent development of a structured abstract format for clinical practice guidelines [15]. While other abstracts may be truncated in MEDLINE, structured abstracts are entered in their entirety, up to a system limit of 4,096 characters.
CONCLUSION

Practice guidelines have great potential for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of health care. NLM is working to improve access to completed guidelines for clinicians, researchers, and medical librarians and also to support those engaged in the development of new guidelines and the revision of existing ones.

REFERENCES


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