Handout #5: Literature Review

A literature review is a report of the published research that has been done on a particular topic. It helps you better understand how the topic has been explained and explored by other researchers. Writing a literature review helps you gain skills in scanning research materials, finding the articles you need, and recognizing valid studies.

Before you get started, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the specific problem or question I want to define?
- What type of literature (e.g., journals, books, government documents) should I review?
- What issues (e.g., effectiveness of programs, methodology, policy change) will I be looking at more closely?

Remember, a literature review is not just a list of materials. It is a report that analyzes and evaluates materials. It can show what is known as well as what is not known. It can also help develop the kind of questions that could be the subject of further research.

Sources for Conducting a Literature Review

There are several sources you can use to conduct a literature review, including:

- Web sites
- Journal articles (available in print and online)
- Books
- Magazine articles
- Informational pamphlets.

Selecting Effective Educational Resources

Guidelines for evaluating Web sites:

- Find out who maintains the site. Government, nonprofit, and university sites have more legally responsible information. They are better sources for health and medical information than commercially owned Web sites. Look for Web sites ending in .gov, .org, and .edu. Typically avoid Web sites ending in .com, except in the case of online journals which can end in .com.
- Look for an editorial board. Look at their credentials and see if they can be contacted through e-mail or by phone.
- Look for links to other Web sites with medical/health information. Well-regarded organizations will not claim to be the only source of information on a particular health topic.
- Notice when the site was last updated. The more recent the update, the more likely the information is current. Health sites that have not been updated within the week or month may have expired information.
- While .com Web sites may not have the most reliable information, they can give you a good idea about what is out there on a certain topic and what is missing.

Journal versus magazine articles:

The difference between journal and magazine articles is that journal articles have been reviewed by experts in the field.   Good examples of journals are the *New England Journal of Medicine, Journal of the American Medical Association, Health Education Research, Health Promotion Practice,* and *Health Education & Behavior.*

Many magazine articles do not go through this same review. This is not to say that these articles have no relevance. For magazines that are targeted to a specific population, a review of the articles on a certain topic can give you very good information about what the public thinks about specific health topics or concerns. You will also find out what information the public is receiving. Just be mindful that this is not always "evidence."

Computerized sources of health information:

There are several online databases that you can use to search thousands of journals, books, and magazines. Here are a few popular databases:

- MEDLINE—contains primarily medical journals, although many health education journals are indexed. You can access this database online as PubMed through the National Library of Medicine at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed.
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)—contains information related to school health, school-aged children, and overall education. This database can be accessed at http://www.accesseric.org.