

Determinants of selective reporting: protocol for a review and content analysis of a random selection of the literature

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Abstract

Background: Selective reporting distorts the aggregate body of scientific evidence, wastes resources and can harm patients' health and the credibility of science. Selective reporting may result from a focus on preferred findings by researchers and others stakeholders. However, it is unclear if some persons or environments are at greater risk of selective reporting than others. Our review assesses what is known and what is postulated about determinants of selective reporting in the scientific domain.

Methods/design: Using search terms for bias and selection combined with terms for reporting and publication, we systematically search the PubMed, Embase, PsycINFO and Web of Science databases. A 25 percent random selection of records is reviewed for inclusion by at least two reviewers based on title and abstract if available and, if needed, the full text. Inter-rater agreement is calculated. Examining the content of the entire article, including, for example the discussion section, we extract phrases mentioning determinants. From this, we compile a structured list of possible determinants. The results are also categorized by type of source (empirical result or view, study design, and academic discipline if variability suffices). We follow the PRISMA-P and PRISMA reporting guidelines for systematic reviews where applicable.

Discussion: We use principles of the systematic review along with principles of qualitative content analysis to focus on the nature of possible determinants of selective reporting. Our review includes both empirical findings and theoretical considerations. It will identify priority questions for further research on mechanisms of selective reporting. Furthermore, it will help in assessing risk of selective reporting. Such "risk profiling" may inform effective policy development on responsible conduct of research. The approach of combining quantitative and qualitative assessment techniques is expected to optimally inform well-targeted intervention studies and inspire policy development.

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