

The 'Implications for Practice' of Empty Reviews: An Analysis of Cochrane Systematic Reviews with No Included Studies

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Background: 'Empty reviews' are those that find no studies eligible for inclusion. The 'Implications for Practice' section of these reviews may be especially problematic for clinicians and other decision-makers.

Objectives: This research examines the reporting of 'Implications for Practice' of empty reviews in *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (The CDSR)*.

Methods: All empty reviews within *The CDSR* as of 15 August 2010 were identified, extracted, and coded for analysis. Descriptive characteristics and thematic

content analysis of the 'Implications for Practice' sections was performed by two authors (JY & LS) and refereed by a third author (PM).

Results: 376 (8.7%) active reviews in *The CDSR* report no studies eligible for inclusion. Only 16 (4.3%) state in 'Implications for Practice' that no studies were eligible for inclusion; 336 (89.4%) say that there is no or insufficient evidence to draw conclusions, but do not note the lack of included studies; 24 (6.4%) make statements that fail to mention the lack of included studies or evidence.

Conclusions: The reporting of 'Implications for Practice' sections appears to differ widely across empty reviews. Failure to mention lack of included studies may lead to misinterpretation of findings. Guidelines for the reporting of 'Implications for Practice' are needed to ensure clear statements that there are no included studies.

Primary Statement Type	N (%)	Concept
No Included	16 (4.3%)	Clear statement of <i>no included studies</i>
No Evidence	257 (68.4%)	Statement of <i>no evidence</i>
Insufficient Evidence	79 (21.0%)	Statement of <i>not enough information to draw conclusions</i>
Other	24 (6.4%)	
Unclear wording	10 (2.7%)	Language is difficult to interpret
Current practice comment	5 (1.3%)	Description or critique of current practice
No implications	4 (1.1%)	Simple statement of no implications for practice
Makes recommendation	3 (0.8%)	Recommends interventions (despite no included studies)
Forced to rely on other information	2 (0.5%)	Statement of need to rely on other evidence or experience