

Research in Practice

Department Editor

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Searching the Literature With Professional Databases

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Professional nurses read the literature to ensure that their clinical practice is based on the best available research evidence. Nurse researchers review the literature when planning a study to discover what is already known about the topic and what is lacking. All of them benefit from knowing the most effective and efficient ways to find the information they need.

Before the days of computers, nurses needing current information would go to the library and look through nursing and medical indexes and huge books that contained an alphabetical list of topics with all the available articles listed under the topic. Then they had to copy the bibliographic information of any articles with interesting titles to check whether they were available in the library. If not, the nurses had to ask a librarian to get the article through interlibrary loan, which cost a small fee.

Today's computers put massive amounts of information literally at our fingertips. Much of it can be accessed from home computers, and the rest can be obtained using library databases. Instead of copying information from large indexes, you can access a computer database, type in your topic, and immediately see a list of current articles available electronically via the Internet.

Even today, however, we rely on librarians for help finding documents because they have a vast knowledge of what is available, where to find it, and how to access it. For this reason, the research column editor asked two librarians to contribute to this column. One of the authors (M.M.) is a hospital librarian and the other (H.H.) is a librarian in a university. In the following sections, the librarians discuss the trustworthiness of Internet resources and describe some of the available databases that you can access from the library or from home.

How Do We Know Whether Computer Information Is Trustworthy?

The Internet and its user-friendly search engines, such as Yahoo and Google, provide massive amounts of information. Some of these data are pulled from professional organizations and links to various professional journals, but some come from nonprofessional, lay sources. No one screens information for accuracy before it goes on the Internet, so it cannot be taken at face value. The reader is responsible for determining whether the information comes from a trustworthy source. In contrast, manuscripts submitted to peer-reviewed journals (like *Gastroenterology Nursing*) undergo stringent review by content experts. Articles from peer-reviewed journals can be retrieved from professional databases, free in some cases or by subscription in others.

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Free Professional Databases

Because no resource will provide everything you need, having an appreciation of what resources exist, what they cover, and how to use them will greatly speed up your literature search. Free databases include PubMed, Medscape, Nursing Center, Google Scholar, and Directory of Nursing Resources. PubMed (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed) is a bibliographic database of references to journal articles. In addition to the key word search, you may try the MeSH (medical subject headings) option to get better results. Try the MeSH tutorial for more information.

The number of publications can be overwhelming, and it is wise to limit your search to articles that meet your situation. For example, you might want to limit your search to articles written in English unless you speak another language. You can also restrict the search to publications from specific years, certain population groups, and certain types of research studies. An English abstract is provided most of the time, and sometimes you can get the full text of the article electronically. If you want to see only those articles that are free of charge, check the box labeled links to full free text when specifying the limitations of your search. Go to the PubMed Internet site and do some practice searches just to explore the possibilities.

Medscape (www.medscape.com) offers a nursing specialty site that includes full text review articles, journal commentary, expert columns, patient education articles, and book reviews. Free registration is required, and you can choose to receive e-mail updates about new articles in Medscape.

Nursing Center (www.nursingcenter.com), operated by Lippincott Williams & Wilkins publishers, provides essential information from leading nursing journals. Most of the information is bibliographic and full text is available for purchase.

Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) provides a simple way to search scholarly literature across many disciplines and sources. It helps identify the most frequently cited research and sorts the results, displaying the most relevant articles first. The Directory of Nursing Resources (www.currentnursing.com/resources) provides a list of free useful nursing resources with links to the sites and includes an amazing variety of information sources.

A powerful database called WorldCat (www.worldcat.com) can be very useful. Because there are still many documents that exist only in print, WorldCat is a worldwide library catalog, identifying books, journals, and other items in all sorts of public, university, and larger hospital libraries. You can determine how far libraries having specific items are from your zip code, enabling an efficient site visit. You can also explore the libraries' links to discover their visitor policies and hours.

Databases That Require a Subscription

Additional databases are available but require a subscription. Most hospitals and universities have libraries that provide access to the databases through an institutional subscription. The institutional subscriptions to periodicals enable easy access to the full text articles linking the bibliographic citation to the actual text. For example, university or hospital library patrons can obtain free electronic copies of articles in Gastroenterology Nursing if the library has a subscription for it. If your library has a subscription to a particular database, you can access the database free of charge.

The most popular nursing database is Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL). The CINAHL contains abstracts to articles covering nursing and other specialized healthcare areas. Although it is primarily a bibliographic database, full text is included in many cases through an enhanced subscription (CINAHL plus full text).

Vendors such as EBSCO and Ovid provide MEDLINE, a database that contains some of the information you will find on PubMed. The advantage of using your institutional MEDLINE is the easy access and user-friendly added features such as additional full text. On the other hand, these MEDLINE versions take time transferring the information from PubMed, and, therefore, the electronic version of the article is not available as quickly with MEDLINE as it is with PubMed.

UpToDate contains review articles about particular diseases and medical topics written by physicians who are experts in the field. According to the UpToDate Web site, it covers more than 7,300 topics in medical specialties and is updated as new information becomes available. Although written for and by physicians, much of the information is also useful for nurses. Personal subscriptions to UpToDate are available, but you can access it free of charge if your hospital library subscribes to it.

Health Reference Center Academic provides access to nursing and allied health journals as well as a wide variety of personal health information sources such as journals, newsletters, pamphlets, and reference books. Some public libraries also subscribe to the Health Reference Center Academic and make it available to anyone with a library card.

Some hospital libraries subscribe to Mosby's Nursing Skills and Mosby's Nursing Consult, which may be accessed through hospital computers. Mosby's Nursing Skills includes information about 480 nursing skills and allows nurse managers and educators to assign hospital employees to practice a particular skill, track their progress, and test their ability to perform the skill. Nurses may also use it to refresh their knowledge or learn a new skill or procedure.

Mosby's Nursing Consult includes full text journals, full textbooks, patient education materials, and drug information. The key word search helps nurses find answers to clinical questions in a timely manner. Nurses can also browse through the journals and books included in this database by a specific title and then select a specific issue or a specific book chapter.

In addition to these databases, EBSCO and Ovid offer collections and subscription packages that may be available through the various affiliated institutions. Check with the hospital or university librarian to discover what resources are available to you. If you are new to your institution's library, you can probably make an extended appointment with a librarian for an introduction to these useful resources. The librarians can also help you identify other services that may be pertinent to your work.

Conclusion

In summary, many electronic information sources are readily available to nurses and many of them are free, making it easier than ever to keep abreast of the latest developments. Just settle down at the computer, plug in the address for the sites, and start searching. Do not forget to use the "HELP" button and the free tutorials to learn more about the resource that you are using. Explore the possibilities and remember that your friendly librarian is always ready and eager to help you