This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA-funded project focused on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
In the clinical setting, to conduct a more efficient and effective search for information, you will need an answerable question. Asking a question may seem obvious, but this BOLT will offer specific steps to help you ask an answerable question that will be directed at helping you find the information you specifically need for your nursing practice and your patient.
One of the most important aims of EBHC is to guide clinicians as they conduct searches of health care literature - looking for related information and answers to questions pertaining to a particular patient’s condition. Finding an answer must be done in the context of what the clinician knows, what the patient wants, and what is available in the literature.
Before you can help yourself or your patient, you must be able find the answer to your question. Asking an answerable question provides a clear idea of what you want while formulating the question so you can maximize your database search results.

By taking the time to formulate your question, you derive several benefits for yourself and your patient. Formulating your question helps you focus valuable time on finding the evidence that is directly relevant to your knowledge needs and your patient’s clinical needs. Thinking carefully about your question can suggest searching strategies that could be useful, and might also suggest the kind of answers your search could take. Formulating your question can also help you communicate more effectively with your patient and with colleagues. An added personal benefit is the sense of satisfaction you may feel from learning something new that can help your patient.
PICO is an mnemonic that makes it easy to remember the key components of an answerable question.

“P” - First, for formulating a question, we look at the patient’s disease or condition - although usually thought of as a single item, two or more diseases can be combined using Boolean operators, if they are relevant to your search for information. Also consider adding limits, such as age, sex, or race if they are relevant for your patient. Keep in mind that although you may be thinking about your patient, resources you retrieve may discuss patient populations with the same or similar conditions as your patient - you want to find those similar resources.

“I” - Next comes the intervention when formulating a question. For example, a single drug may serve as your sole focus. Other examples of an intervention include any exposure, treatment, patients’ perception, diagnostic test, or prognostic factor.

“C” - The third step for formulating a question allows you to add a comparative intervention if it is relevant to your question. If a drug is your intervention, this step might compare other drugs or a placebo.

“O” - The fourth step in formulating your question adds the outcome that you want to see discussed in resources retrieved from your search. Outcomes may include risk of disease, accuracy of diagnosis, or rate of occurrences of adverse effects.
Databases have evolved to where there is no longer a strong distinction between being only full text or bibliographic. This is especially evident at institutions where libraries add links to their e-journals and e-books for their searchable databases. It will help your searching if you make yourself familiar with the structure of the databases that you search - including items like their index terms and search limits (age, language, gender, etc.). There is more on this topic in other LISTEN BOLTs.

You need to decide which database is likely to be the best source for an answer to your question, and formulate your question to fit that database. In brief:
• CINAHL (Cumulated Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature) is a comprehensive bibliographic and full text database that focuses on only nursing and allied health literature (including journals, books, drug monographs, dissertations, and images). It is a commercial product, requiring a subscription, and usually available online through libraries but can also be accessed by a personal subscription.
• PubMed/MEDLINE is available free online using any computer with access to the Internet. It is a comprehensive biomedical database that includes good coverage of the nursing literature (but not as focused as CINAHL). If completeness outside of the nursing literature is important, PubMed should be considered for your question.
• EMBASE is a major commercial European database (subscription required). It covers the world biomedical literature and includes a good coverage of nursing literature.
• The CDSR (a Cochrane Database) contains only systematic reviews (either completed reviews, or those protocols currently being prepared and reviewed by collaborative groups of recognized experts in their field). It is a fairly small database without a controlled vocabulary (index terms). Abstracts can be reviewed for free, full text access is available through the Cochrane Library.
• PsycINFO is a bibliographic database focused on literature in the behavioral sciences and mental health, including psychiatry, education, neuroscience, nursing, and other health care disciplines. Online access requires a subscription or daily fee.
Asking an answerable question might seem like something that you already do; but, becoming an effective and efficient searcher might mean familiarizing yourself with the steps outlined in this BOLT and practicing those steps for formulating an answerable question. Try keeping a notebook of the questions that you encounter in clinic, write down what you wanted to know and how you formulated your question. As time permits review your notebook entries and ask yourself how you might have done your search better or differently.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for other helpful tips on using technology; and, seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
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