This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA funded project focusing on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
Nurses must use all types of information when providing patient care. Sorting through the medical literature to find just the information that you are looking for is a growing problem for all nurses. This BOLT will provide some insight into the best sources for good quality health care information.
Clinical settings often have a collection of books, magazines, and other information sources in hardcopy or electronic form. However, even a sizeable collection of such works will not amount to anything more than a very small fraction of the nursing knowledge base. Moreover, especially in the case of textbooks, it is very likely that the information contained in these collections is outdated and not the best sources for patient care. Yet, whether the format is electronic or paper, each kind can be useful for answering different kinds of questions.
The journal literature, also known as the primary literature, is the place where all current research results and new ideas are first published. So when you want the latest information for your patient, look here.

The nursing literature is growing by leaps and bounds. It is not organized to make finding specific articles easy, so searching bibliographic databases like PubMed/Medline, CINAHL, or the Cochrane databases is very important.
Bibliographic databases such as these organize the journal literature in a variety of ways that make it much easier to find exactly the articles you are looking for. These databases record information about all health care related articles going back decades into the past. They make it possible for professionals to search the entire nursing knowledge base for the right answer. Each of these databases has features that make it easy to limit your search to just the articles you need.
Textbooks

- Good for general background information
- Not always current
- Secondary Literature

Textbooks are a staple of nursing education and are found in many hospital libraries and wards. They are most useful for answering general, background questions, such as questions on vital signs, infection control, or administering medications. Textbooks are sometimes referred to as secondary literature because they synthesized information from a large number of journal literature articles into chapters. They are one step removed from the most current journal literature.

One major drawback to the textbook literature, whether it is electronic or paper, is that it is usually not up to date. Several years can pass after the author finishes writing and until the book is published. Electronic textbook publishers still adhere to this model and often produce a new electronic edition for a title only when a new paper edition is ready. One notable exception is UpToDate, which has a textbook format, no paper version, and has a quarterly update policy.
If the textbook literature is one step removed from the journal literature, then encyclopedias, thesauri, and dictionaries are two steps removed. They are very useful for finding general answers to questions. Dictionaries and thesauri are useful for finding the right word to use or in understanding a concept. Dictionaries are very useful in a clinical setting. Encyclopedias contain entries on topics so broad that they usually do not serve a useful clinical purpose.
The Internet is a great source of all kinds of information. Search engines like Google, Yahoo, and Bing index web pages and make links to them available in your searches. For general uses, these and other search engines can be very useful, but they have little value in clinical nursing. Even the best search engines can only claim to have indexed about 10% of all available web pages. Doing a search on Google, for example, does not mean that you are searching the databases like PubMed/MEDLINE or CINAHL.
Remember to use the resources that are designed for your patient care needs, like CINAHL, and when in doubt, ask an information professional like your librarian.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for more helpful tips on using technology and seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
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