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Original Article

A quality evaluation of nursing intervention studies in Mainland China: From 1979 to 2012

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ABSTRACT

Background: The number of papers published in the field of nursing practice has greatly increased in recent years in Mainland China, yet the quality of these papers is highly variable. There has been no attempt to comprehensively estimate the overall quantity and quality of these papers.

Objectives: To systematically retrieve nursing intervention studies published in simplified Chinese from 1979 to 2012, critically appraise their quality, and provide suggestions for future development.

Methods: All of the papers were retrieved from China Biology Medicine disc database. The preliminary screening of retrieved publications was performed prior to conducting a rigorous quality evaluation of the remaining publications. 10 characteristics would be included in consideration in quality evaluations.

Results: 69,150 papers were retrieved according to searching strategy. 7391 of them were included after preliminary screening and appraised critically. Among the 10 characteristics considered in quality evaluations, the lowest ratings were observed for the factors of "utilisation of blind method" (13 articles), "description of loss of follow-up" (499 articles), "appropriate calculation of sample size" (511 articles) and "randomised assignment of patients to treatments" (652 articles).

Conclusions: Chinese papers published in the field of nursing practice have increased over time, but improvements remain needed to ensure that thorough studies with high-quality research methodologies are being performed. Future nursing researchers should not only improve the design of their intervention studies but also clearly describe the methodology they used, especially in group randomisation, blinded research designs, and estimations of required sample sizes.

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1. Introduction

Nursing academics in China have significantly advanced since China resumed offering higher education programmes in nursing in 1983, and the number of Chinese publications related to nursing research has continued to increase in recent years [1]. These papers can be grouped into two categories: papers written in English and published in international journals and papers written in Chinese and published in domestic Chinese journals. There are relatively few papers in the former category, which includes a total of slightly more than 300 articles published between 1999 and 2011 [2]. The content and quality of these papers have been thoroughly analysed, and these analyses have been published in both domestic Chinese journals [2,3] and international journals [4,5]. In contrast, there are an enormous number of papers that have been written in Chinese and published only in domestic Chinese journals. As of October 20th 2013, 415,267 entries related to nursing studies were retrieved from China Biology Medicine (CBM), a database of Chinese biomedical literature. Although certain samples of these publications have been analysed by Chinese scholars [6,7], there has been no attempt to comprehensively estimate the overall quantity and quality of these papers. Moreover, due to language barriers, foreign scholars have little knowledge of papers that have been published in domestic Chinese journals, and relevant reports were not either found [8].

Intervention studies constitute the largest subset of nursing-related research publications. Intervention studies include randomised controlled trials and controlled clinical trials. Both the Cochrane Nursing Care Network [9] and Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) [10] have stated that rigorously designed intervention studies can provide high levels of evidence. In China, although the number of papers published in the field of nursing practice has greatly increased in recent years, the quality of these papers is highly variable. It is vital to search for and select high-quality intervention studies to ensure the scientific value and effective application of Chinese nursing practices [11].

Because Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world, Chinese publications constitute an important subset of the global digital scientific database. Therefore, a search for publications in simplified Chinese in the field of interventional nursing research, in combination with the critical evaluation of these publications, can help foreign scholars understand nursing research in China. These types of approaches are also important for promoting communication and collaboration across national borders and language barriers among scholars in the field of nursing research.

2. Material and methods

Two stages were included in this study. First one was systematic retrieving of nursing intervention studies published in simplified Chinese, and the second one was critical appraisal of their quality.

2.1. The research team

The research team included 5 experts from the Fudan University JBI Centre for Evidence-Based Nursing, 1 associate research fellow from the Fudan University Library, 30 graduate students in nursing, 1 coordinator, and 1 technician. Prior to performing the research of this study, all of the graduate students on the research team had completed 54 credit hours of evidence-based nursing courses from the Fudan University School of Nursing, studied evidence-based nursing theory and practice, and received 2 credit hours of methodological training.

2.2. Database searches for published nursing intervention studies

Database searches targeted nursing intervention studies published in simplified Chinese between January 1979 and December 2012. Inclusion criteria of studies are: a) studies in nursing field with a design of intervention studies, including randomised controlled trials (RCT) or controlled clinical trials (CCT); b) a study of human, including patients and health person; c) with clear intervention (s); d) with clear comparison intervention(s); e) with clear outcome(s).

To ensure complete coverage of the targeted publications, the CBM database was searched in this study. CBM is the only comprehensive database of Chinese publications in medicine. This database includes entries for all Chinese medical publications since 1979; all entries are subjected to various annotation procedures, including indexing by title and category. The research team used the search strategy that the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions outlines [9] as an approach for finding intervention studies in the MEDLINE database as a basis for designing a strategy to search for intervention studies in CBM (See Table 1).

2.3. The screening of publications and evaluation of publication quality

An enormous number of publications were retrieved by searches of the CBM database. To enhance efficiency and reject research papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria of this study, the preliminary screening of retrieved publications was performed prior to conducting a rigorous quality evaluation of the remaining publications. During the preliminary screening process, evaluators were required to read the title, origin, abstract, and, if necessary, the full text of each retrieved publication. Articles that satisfied any of the following criteria were excluded from the study: a) non research in the field of nursing, b) lack of a specified intervention method, c) lack of a clear control, d) unclear outcome measures, and e) others, such as a very short length, ethical issues, reviews, blank record, repeat records and so on.

After the preliminary screening was completed, Note-Express reference management software was used to download the full text of all remaining publications, which were individually evaluated according to predefined criteria.

Quality evaluation criteria were combined by Oxford CASP critical appraisal for RCT [12] and JBI critical appraisal checklist for randomised and pseudo-randomised studies [13]. Ten

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