9.8 Quality assessment of systematic reviews

Reviews of reviews

If you are conducting a review of reviews, you need to decide whether you will use these to find relevant empirical research or whether you will look for agreement in conclusions across existing reviews. You might review existing reviews for a class assignment where the time it would require to review all the empirical evidence might not be available to you. You might scan reviews to gather information relevant to the care of a patient you saw today. In any case you need some rules to guide assessment of review quality.

Guidelines have been published for reporting systematic reviews. The most commonly referenced are the PRISMA guidelines. These is not a quality assessment checklist but alerts us to best practice in reporting.

The AMSTAR checklist provides both bias assessment items and decision rules.

Other scales exist such as the CASP assessment checklist, but the items mix data extraction with bias assessment and decision rules are confounded by value laden terms such as ‘Did the review’s authors do enough to assess the quality of the included studies?’ where the term is ‘enough’ is not defined.