Correspondence

The pitfalls and promise of ‘scoping review’ in gastroenterology literature

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Contribution

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None

When reading the recent scoping review by Shenoy et al (1), I was delighted to see a focus on the global south and an approach to review that is broad in its inclusion criteria and a coherent narrative on the state of the academic field. Such focus from a well-respected international academic team in a world leading journal sets a precedent for scholarly discourse.

The purpose in writing is therefore not to challenge the relevance of their research question or validity of their findings, but to reflect on what I believe was their inappropriate use of the 'scoping review' methodology for their work.

The scoping study was brought to prominence by Arksey and O'Malley, a pair of social scientists, who developed the use of this review approach to synthesis of literature (2). They articulate four core goals for a scoping review: 1) examine the state (or 'scope') of research on a topic, 2) screen for the need for specific reviews, 3) synthesize and share broad focus of research 4) highlight key gaps in the literature.

The time to use this approach would be when there is a sudden increase in literature on a topic (e.g. COVID-19 or Artificial Intelligence) or an often studied but rarely synthesised area now becomes a focus of interest, as both are key situations when the goals above are relevant.

In discussing and refining these criteria, Levac et al (3) found that it was common to misinterpret diverse questions broad in scope as needing scoping reviews. Looking at this paper (1), I would propose that this is what has been done. The authors have important but diverse questions on epidemiology, natural history and phenotype. The authors present narratively synthesised data for each question of great interest but not matching the goals of the tradition.

Most importantly, other review traditions could have added to the work, including perhaps most importantly appraisal of the epidemiological and observational works and where appropriate, meta-analysis. This leaves the work methodologically in a sort of no-mans land. No fault has been made and the data is accurate, but further methods and analysis have not been completed.

I would suggest to researchers that if the focus of a review is to be specific (even if addressing multiple questions wide ranging in scope), then an alternative review method from the diverse portfolio available may allow that wider potential to be met (Umbrella review, narrative review, state of the art review). This leaves scoping review to 'scope' or 'map' the literature as a precursor to such a review and not to answer questions wide-ranging in 'scope'.

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2. Arksey H, O'Malley L. Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework. Int J Soc Res 2005;8:19–32.
3. Levac D, Colquhoun H, O'Brien K. Scoping studies: advancing the methodology. Implementation Sci 2010;5:69