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# Tips and Tricks for a Successful Literature Review as Part of Medical Career Development

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**Rezumat**

***Review-ul de literatură, între dificultate și sprijin în evoluția profesională***

Review-ul de literatură este o consecință directă a creşterii volumului de informații ştiințifice disponibile, devenind o necessitate nu doar pentru domeniul medical. Un astfel de material, corect realizat, este de mare folos oricărui profesionist care doreşte să se mențină la curent cu cele mai noi cunoştințe şi concepte. Scopul propus este de a ajuta şi ghida medicii rezidenți, doctoranzii şi tinerii cercetători în înțelegerea conceptelor care stau la baza realizării unui review de literatura şi însuşirea metodologiei general acceptate pentru realizarea acestuia. Selectarea surselor de informatie, accesarea bazelor de date, conceptul de peer-review, indexarea şi factorul de impact sunt clar prezentate ca elemente ce nu pot fi neglijate în valorizarea surselor de informație ştiințifică. Structura unei revizii de literatură trebuie să țină cont de formatul general acceptat pentru un astfel de articol, fiecare capitol avaând importanta sa. În funcție de calitatea şi heterogenitatea rezultatelor obținute după analiza datelor colectate, revizia poate fi structurată narativ sau sistematic, omogenitatea rezultatelor permițând aplicarea metodelor de studiu statistic (meta analiza). Deşi pare dificilă, realizarea unei revizii de literatură este de fapt mai uşoară şi mai rapidă decât elaborarea unui studiu original, bazat pe o cercetare ştiințifică experimentală sau clinică. Revizia de literatură poate fi realizată în condiții de confort, online, indiferent de locație şi constituie un binevenit suport în dezvoltarea carierei profesionale şi ştiințifice.

Cuvinte cheie: revizie de literature, baze de date, revizie sistematică, meta analiză, dezvoltare profesională

**Abstract**

The literature review is a direct consequence of the increased volume of scientific information, becoming a necessity not only for the medical field. Such material, properly done, is of great use to any professional who wishes to keep abreast of the latest knowledge and concepts. The proposed goal is to help and guide resident doctors, doctoral students, and young researchers in understanding the concepts that are the basis of conducting a literature review and acquiring the generally accepted methodology for conducting it. The selection of information sources, accessing databases, the concept of peer-review, indexing and the impact factor are clearly presented as elements that cannot be neglected in the valorisation of scientific information sources. The structure of a literature review must consider the generally accepted format for such an article, with each chapter having its own importance. Depending on the quality and heterogeneity of the results obtained after analysing the collected data, the review can be structured narratively or systematically, the homogeneity of the results allowing the application of statistical study methods (meta-analysis). Although it seems difficult, conducting a literature review is easier and faster than developing an original study based on experimental or clinical scientific research. The literature review can be carried out in comfortable conditions, online, regardless of location and is a welcome support in the development of the professional and scientific career.

Key words: literature review, databases, systematic review, meta-analysis, professional development

## Introduction

In recent years, the amount of information available has grown exponentially, the rate of progress in all scientific fields, including the medical one, is very intense, a fact that brings a challenge for professionals in any field to keep in touch with the latest knowledge and concepts. The impressive volume of information contained in extremely numerous and diverse publications, among which we mention treatises, monographs, specialized magazines or summaries of the works of scientific events, requires a sorting and cataloging of this information under the conditions of universal accessibility offered by the Internet. In this way, the need to create a synthesis, some summaries, which will reduce the volume of available information to accessible sizes, becomes obvious (1). In order to achieve this objective, it is therefore useful to rank the sources of information according to their relevance, and then to systematize the informational material (2). This is the main objective of literature reviews, and in terms of guiding principles, the conditions set out above are those that a medical literature review must meet (2,3).

The aim of the current paper is to help and guide resident doctors, doctoral students and young researchers in understanding the concepts that underlie the writing of a literature review, learning the generally accepted methodology for its achievement (4,5) and guiding the steps through a process that seems laborious at first but which, once mastered, leads to obtaining some valuable scientific works that will prove useful both for the scientific community through the synthesis of information already published and verified from a scientific point of view, as well as for the authors.

## Methodology

Nowadays, the universal availability of information through the Internet and its easy and comfortable access from almost anywhere, bring the inevitable temptation to limit the search for sources of scientific information only in the online environment (6), leaving behind those sources that are not available in this way (1).

A correct and complete Review of the medical literature should not exclude the treatises in the respective field because they show the exact level of knowledge in a medical field, usually containing detailed information and updated fundamental notions regarding the addressed topic (7). Medical treatises help to identify areas in which knowledge and concepts have evolved dynamically over time, as well as aspects that present controversies. The recommendation would be to consider the established treatises that are practically unanimously accepted and to access the most recent edition of the respective treatise whenever it is available (1).

Monographs dedicated to a certain medical topic must also be included in a literature review. Of course, this is where the issue of monograph selection comes in, and the criteria that can help are related to the reputation of the authors, proven mainly by their other publications devoted to the same topic, the reputation of the publishing house that publishes the monograph and eventually the reputation of the school or medical institution from which the author comes. And in the case of monographs, a mandatory requirement for the actuality of the data contained is that the moment of their appearance should be as recent as possible.

The most consistent part for any literature review is represented by the indexed scientific journals (Journal), available by online access to international databases. One of the most reputable databases is PubMed which is managed by the Library of medicine of the National Institute of Health of the United States of America, being at the same time an official website of the US government. PubMed comprises articles published in biomedical scientific publications, includes 28 million article citations, with links to their abstract or full text, available on PubMed, on other partner sites or on the respective journal sites. More than 2700 scientific publications are indexed on PubMed.

Another reputable database is SCOPUS which represents the most comprehensive database that includes per-review publications. Scopus includes journals, books, volumes with papers presented at scientific events in various fields: science, technology, medicine, social sciences and humanities, art. Scopus database is used by more than 3000 research entities, academic institutions, government agencies all over the world, that evaluate research results (1,2).

We consider that it should be useful to explain the concept of peer review: this is an evaluation process through which the members of the editorial team of the publication, but also other independent experts, critically analyze the quality and scientific value. As a rule, for the accepted articles, specific requirements are formulated to improve the form and or the substance of the manuscript (minor revision/major revision) which conditions the final acceptance. The peer review process represents a unanimously recognized guarantee of quality because the final decision belongs to several specialists, so the degree of subjectivity is low. Nevertheless, the value of the accepted manuscript is increased by the convergent implementation of several ideas/visions (1,2).

Eugene Garfield founded in 1960 the Philadelphia Institute for Scientific Information, where the acronym ISI comes from. In 1963, the Science Citation Index was introduced, where the acronym SCI comes from, and in 1976, Journal Citation Reports = JCR was published for the first time. In 1997, the forerunner of the current Web of Science (Web of Knowledge) appeared, which allows online consultation of citation indexes. Also, as a historical aspect, ISI was taken over in 1992 by Thomson Scientific and Healthcare becoming ISI-Thomson Reuters, then in 2015 Clarivate Analytics took over ISI,

Thomson-Reuters integrated and developed their database and indexed in the Web of Science publications and articles appearing in them based on the fulfillment and compliance by the indexed publications of clearly defined quality criteria and quantitative criteria that allow the calculation of scientometric indices. Since the takeover of ISI, Clarivate Analytics publishes JCR. For Web of Science, the definitions are very clear, there is only the option indexed vs non-indexed Web of Science, to this indexing is added the impact factor published annually by Clarivate Analytics in Journal Citations Reports. The impact factor is a scientometric index that represents the average annual number of citations of the articles published in the previous two years in the respective journal or in other publications indexed in Web of Science. The impact factor quantifies the importance of the publication for the respective field (*Table 1* - list of top 10 IF in 2021 valid for 2022). As for the value of the impact factor, the journals are classified according to it and are divided into 4 quartiles, in descending order obviously depending on the impact factor in Q1 finding journals with the highest impact factor, in Q4 finding journals with the lowest impact factor (*Table 2*) (2,8).

**Table 1.** List of top 10 IF in 2021, valid for 2022

| | Impact Factor IF (2022) | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | CA-A Cancer Journal for Clinicians | 286.13 |
| 2 | Lancet | 202.731 |
| 3 | New England Journal of Medicine | 176.079 |
| 4 | JAMA - Journal of the American Medical Association | 157.335 |
| 5 | Nature Reviews Molecular Cell Biology | 113.915 |
| 6 | Nature Reviews Drug Discovery | 112.288 |
| 7 | Nature Reviews Immunology | 108.555 |
| 8 | LANCET Respiratory Medicine | 102.642 |
| 9 | BMJ - British Medical Journal | 93.333 |
| 10 | Nature Medicine | 87.241 |

Theoretically, non-indexed publications can

**Table 2.** List of journals in Science Citation Expanded (SCIE), Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and Arts Humanities Citation Index (AHCI), by subfields and quartiles (Q), according to the JCR 2021, edition of October 19, 2022

| Journal | ISSN | e ISSN | Subdomain/Web of Science Category-Index | AIS Quartile | Position |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ultrasound in Obstretics & Gynecology | 0960-7692 | 1469-0705 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 1 |
| Ultraschall in Der Medizin | 0172-4614 | 1438-8782 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 2 |
| Ultrasonics Sonochemistry | 1350-4177 | 1873-2828 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 3 |
| Journal of Sound and Vibration | 0022-460X | 1095-8568 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 4 |
| IEEE-ACM Transactions on Audio Speech and Language Processing | 2329-9290 | 2329-9304 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 5 |
| Phonetica | 0031-8388 | 1423-0321 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 6 |
| Ultrasound in Medicine and Biology | 0301-5629 | 1879-291X | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 7 |
| IEEE Transactions on Ultrasonics Ferroelectrics and Frequency Control | 0885-3010 | 1525-8955 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q1 | 8 |
| Journal of Ultrasound in Medicine | 0278-4297 | 1550-9613 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 1 |
| Ultrasonics | 0041-624X | 1874-9968 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 2 |
| Speech Communication | 0167-6393 | 1872-7182 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 3 |
| International Journal of Aeroacoustics | 1475-472X | 2048-4003 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 4 |
| Journal of the Acoustical Society of America | 0001-4966 | 1520-8524 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 5 |
| Applied Acoustics | 0003-682X | 1872-910X | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 6 |
| Wave Motion | 0165-2125 | 1878-433X | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 7 |
| Journal of Vibration and Control | 1077-5463 | 1741-2986 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q2 | 8 |
| Journal of Vibration and Acoustics - Transactions of the ASME | 1048-9002 | 1528-8927 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 1 |
| Ultrasonic Imaging | 0161-7346 | 1096-0910 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 2 |
| Medical Ultrasonography | 1844-4172 | 2066-8643 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 3 |
| Acoustics Australia | 0814-6039 | 1839-2571 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 4 |
| Journal of Low Frequency Noise Vibration and Active Control | 1461-3484 | 2048-4046 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 5 |
| Acta Acustica | N/A | 2681-4617 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 6 |
| EURASIP Journal of Audio Speech and Music Processing | 1687-4722 | 1687-4722 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 7 |
| ACTA Acustica United with Acustica | 1610-1928 | 2681-4617 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q3 | 8 |
| Shock and Vibration | 1070-9622 | 1875-9203 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 1 |
| Journal of Cunical Ultrasound | 0091-2751 | 1097-0096 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 2 |
| Journal of Theoretical and Computational Acoustics | 2591-7285 | 2591-7811 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 3 |
| Journal of the Audio Engineering Society | 1549-4950 | 1549-4950 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 4 |
| Acoustical Physics | 1063-7710 | 1562-6865 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 5 |
| International Journal of Acoustics and Vibration | 1027-5851 | N/A | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 6 |
| Archives of Acoustics | 0137-5075 | 2300-262X | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 7 |
| Noise Control Engineering Journal | 0736-2501 | 0736-2501 | ACOUSTICS- SCIE | Q4 | 8 |

also be included in a literature review, but their scientific value is considered low. However, there are recently published publications that could not yet be evaluated and indexed and that should not be neglected. We often come across national publications that are usually not indexed at the international level. However, they could prove to be very useful as they have a closer connection with the specific national pathology and problem. Also, in non-indexed publications one can identify articles published by less established authors whose manuscripts are hardly accepted in indexed publications.

## Results

The literature review is an article that hires several different primary studies and that can draw conclusions on the effectiveness of a certain intervention. The literature review can be systematic or narrative (9,10). The narrative review only provides a summary of the research on a certain topic without an explicit description of the methodology used. The lack of methodology raises some issues about the scientific correctness of the respective revision, because in the absence of methodology, the reproducibility of the conducted study is called into question (4,5).

The systematic literature review is the research method that has a clearly formulated research question and uses explicit and systematic methods for the identification, selection, critical evaluation of relevant primary sources, extraction and analysis of the data included in the review (11,12). Statistical methods (meta-analysis) may or may not be used in the systematic literature review. The approach is scientific, reproducible, and transparent, to minimize the researcher's bias (defined as biased attitude, subjectivity, or systematic error) (*Fig. 1*).

The systematic literature review is an essential part of any research project because it allows the identification of existing research (relevant to the field in question), prevents duplication, allows the development of the most suitable method (by analyzing the research method and data collection used by previous research) and allows the identification of unexplored areas (13).

A delicate subject in scientific documentation is the so-called gray literature: doctoral theses, papers presented at medical conferences, reports of studies, official and legal publications, or reviews. The value of this gray literature is extremely uneven between the different sources, but sometimes it brings the most recent information (for example, publications in volumes of summaries of papers presented at medical conferences).

Assessing the quality of the studies included in a literature review is necessary to determine the mandatory minimum threshold to include a study in the review, to explore the qualitative differences between studies and allow the exploration of the heterogeneity of the study results, to detect systematic errors

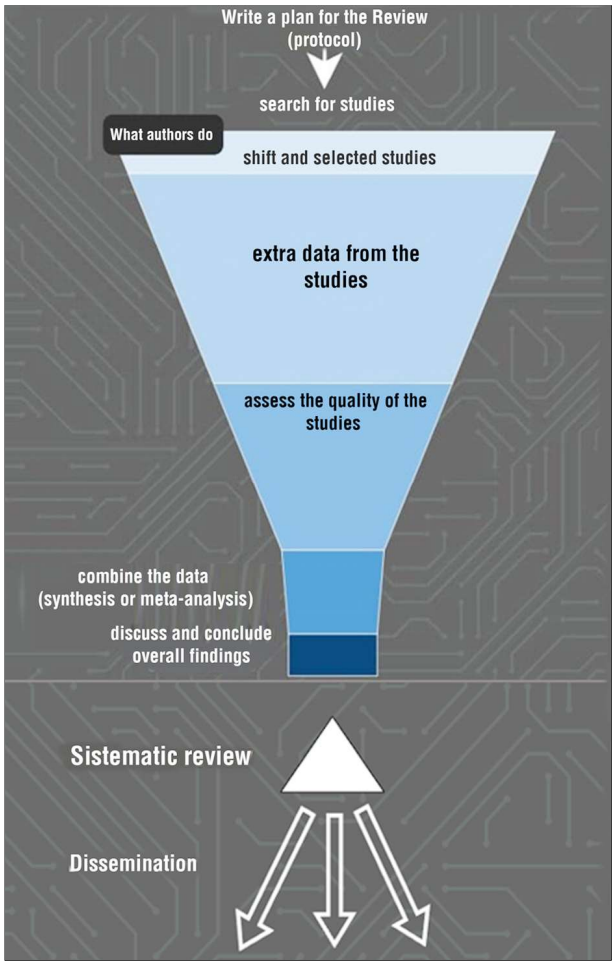


**Figure 1.** Systematic literature review

(bias) and to guide the interpretation of the results and allow the formulation of recommendations for further research (14,15,16)

The validity of studies is evaluated considering their design, the environment in which they were carried out and analyzed (which represents internal validity), as well as the considered population the analysed intervention and the measured results (which represent external validity). The internal validity of a study shows the degree to which its results have the potential to approximate the truth. External validity, also called the degree of generalization, shows the extent to which the effects observed in a study can be applied outside the box, that is, generalized.

The systematic error of a study is defined as the tendency to generate results that are systematically located at a distance from the "true" result. The systematic error can be generated by the selection method and in this case, it is removed by random assignment to groups without the participants knowing which group they belong to. The way the study is conducted also generates systematic error and this can be prevented by double-blind studies with a standard protocol (17). The method of evaluating the results is also a factor that carries systematic error, the "blinding" of both the study participants and those evaluating the results being necessary to prevent the error. A final factor to prevent systematic error is not to include in the final analysis the patients withdrawn from the study or excluded (18,19).

## Discussions

After the studies that meet the minimum quality threshold have been selected, a detailed qualitative analysis must be accomplished, which will be followed by a ranking or classification into groups of the same quality, for studies with the same value, a statistical analysis of the results (meta-analysis) is possible.

The evaluation of the quality of the studies will be analysed according to their design and the method of conducting, as well as the way the data were analyzed. It is necessary to evaluate and score each selected item, based on a checklist.

In order to evaluate the quality of a study, we must check if its description is appropriate, in terms of the theoretical framework and methodology of the study, if the data analysis is correct and was carried out by at least two researchers, if contradictory observations were sought and if there is a link between the study design and the theory underlying the analysis and the claims of generalization of the results (20,21).

For any literature review, a research question must be formulated that considers the target population, the targeted intervention, the design of the primary studies and their results. The inclusion and exclusion criteria must be clearly stated and logically derived from the question under review. To account for the subjectivity of the researcher, the criteria must be established before the selection begins. The criteria must cover the population, the intervention, the results, and the design of the study to ensure a quality standard for the literature review (22,23).

It is advisable that the search strategy begins with a series of exploratory searches using electronic databases. Relevant keywords can also be identified from primary studies found during a random literature search. Articles containing the set keywords are searched so as to cover the items in the research question. From the identified articles, it is useful to search the list of bibliographic references, which in turn can provide us with relevant articles (24,25).

Data extraction is the process by which the literature reviewer selects the necessary information from the identified primary studies. In order to minimize the error, it is recommended that the first step should be to generate a data extraction sheet containing all the elements to be extracted from the primary studies, the use of electronic sheets being preferable (26).

The data extraction form must contain both general information (date, study identification

elements, identity of the reviewer - if there are several authors) as well as specific information related to the verification of the eligibility of the study, its methodological quality, the results, and any statistical analysis methods used (27,28).

For a descriptive synthesis of the results of a literature review, the data must be synthesized in the form of tables, which should be structured to highlight the similarities and differences between the included studies. Data heterogeneity can be clinical (generated by different characteristics of the participants, of the studied intervention or of the measured change), methodological (related to the design and quality of the study) or related to the results (reported effects). The heterogeneity of the results prevents the use of meta-analysis (29,30).

Data synthesis in qualitative research is usually narrative, the data that will be analyzed can take the form of themes that were generated in qualitative research. In qualitative research, theory has a key role in the way of data collection and interpretation, therefore syntheses can be guided by theory. By comparing some qualitative research carried out on different populations and in different places, the possibility of data generalization can increase.

For any review of the literature, its results must be presented in the text in the form of a table and, as far as possible, graphically illustrated. Although this is laborious work, it allows the reader to quickly form an opinion on the quality and characteristics of the included studies.

For structuring a literature review, both the separate presentation of results and discussions and the formulation of an integrated chapter of discussion results are accepted. In any situation, it is mandatory to establish the main results of the literature review and present its strong and weak points, based on the evaluation of its quality and the relationship with other similar literature reviews, considering any difference in quality and result (31).

The significance of the results of the literature review is given by the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence included in the paper, by the direction and magnitude of the effect observed in the summarized studies, but also by the applicability of the results of the review. The recommendations of the authors of the literature review must consider the practical implications for doctors and those who make health policies, as well as the unanswered questions that may indicate future research directions (32,33).

The conclusions of a literature review can end the discussion chapter, but it is desirable to be written as a separate chapter that does not exceed half a page. In addition to the implications and recommendations for medical practice, the conclusions must also contain proposals for future research.

In preparing a manuscript of the literature review type, the authors must consider a generally accepted structure of such a manuscript and specify its form in accordance with the specific requirements available on the website of the journal to which they are going to submit the manuscript for evaluation, in the instructions for authors section.

Any literature review must have a summary (abstract) which in many cases is recommended to be limited to 200 words and must be accompanied by no less than 3 and no more than 10 keywords.

The introduction chapter must present general information on the topic proposed for the literature review as well as the motivation for carrying out the review.

The methodology is an extremely important chapter that must contain the research question, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the search strategy used, the diagram of the selection process and the description of the data synthesis method. The explanation of all these elements in the methodology allows the evaluation of the quality of the literature review and ensures its eventual reproducibility (*Fig. 2*)(3).

The selection diagram of the relevant studies must show the stages by which, starting from the potentially relevant studies identified after an exhaustive search of the

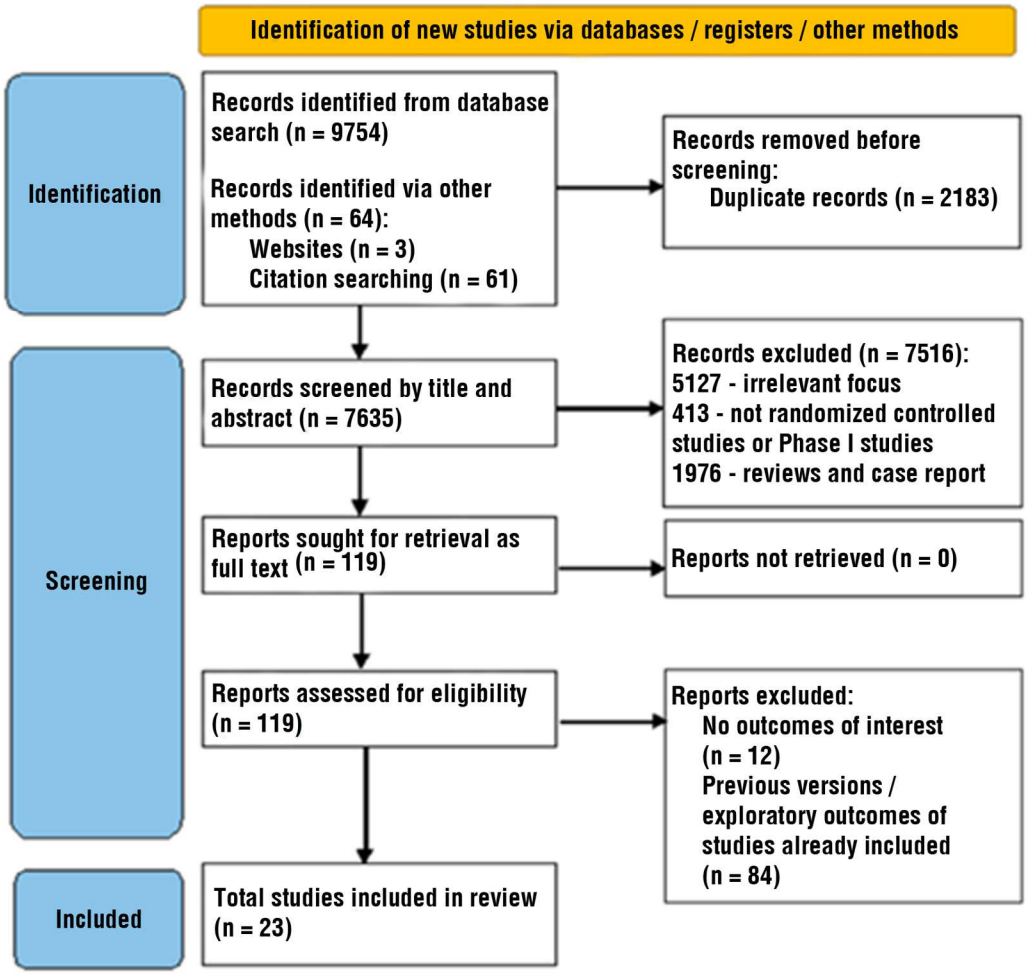


**Figure 2.** The literature flow diagram (3)

databases, after excluding certain studies for reasons that must be specified, the necessary studies are obtained in full text to allow the detailed evaluation. After evaluating the full text studies, some of them are excluded, also specifying the motivations, and finally the relevant studies that will be included in the systematic review are obtained. From this final number of studies, if studies with the same value for this category are identified, statistical analysis methods can be applied, obtaining a meta-analysis. The content of the following chapters of the literature review (results, discussions, conclusions) has already been discussed. At the end of the manuscript, statements regarding the authors' contribution, study funding, potential conflicts of interest, ethical aspects and data availability must be added (6).

The bibliography of a literature review is an extremely important part, where the studies identified during the literature review must be found, as well as numerous other bibliographic references that allow the discussion chapter of the manuscript to be written. A small number of bibliographic references suggests to those evaluating the manuscript superficial scientific research on the part of the authors and may constitute a reason for rejecting the manuscript. The minimum number of bibliographic references in the case of a literature review is not clearly

defined and the general recommendation is to check the indications for authors on the journal website, as well as similar published articles (3,6).

When writing a literature review manuscript, the appendix chapter must contain tables, figures, images, other possibly additional materials that can be available online in the event of the publication of the article. It is not recommended that authors spend time inserting the graphics into the text, each publishing house having its own way of technical editing of the final form in the case of accepted manuscripts. When a publisher provides a template for writing a manuscript, it is recommended that this one should be used.

## Conclusions

A (systematic) literature review is a laborious process that must be carefully planned and rigorously conducted to provide scientifically valid data. It is recommended, we could even say mandatory, to follow the steps for conducting a literature review that have been described. The process of carrying out a literature review may seem rather difficult, but still possible to be learned. In addition to the theoretical training provided in various forms of university and postgraduate education, there are informative materials that can be accessed and studied online. It is recommended to start with a narrative review and then to take the step forward, towards a systematic literature review. As experience and documentation on statistical research methods accumulate, the final step towards a meta-analysis can be made.

Although it seems difficult to carry out a literature review, it is easier and faster than the elaboration of an original study based on experimental or clinical scientific research. The literature review can be carried out in comfortable conditions, online, regardless of location and is a welcome support in the development of the professional and scientific career.

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### *Data Availability Statement*

The data is available online in the references we included. There is no outside storage of data since we did not use any data of our own

and made an analysis of data published by other authors.

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