Chapter 2
Finding the Evidence for Practice in Social Work

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ABSTRACT
The revolution in information technologies, in particular the growth of the Internet and greater access to computers, has given social workers unprecedented access to information resources. Researching such resources is crucial and it needs to be done efficiently. Planning an efficient search requires knowing which databases and other resources to use, knowing how to formulate an answerable question, identifying terms that inform the question, selecting the appropriate methodological filters, and being able to critically appraise evidence for its quality and relevance. This chapter, therefore, outlines some of the research sources available to social workers, it looks at some principles for finding information for practice in social work, and it outlines some criteria for evaluating the quality of that information.

INTRODUCTION
In 2001, a 24-year-old woman died from lung and kidney complications in a clinical trial. She died because the investigators performed inadequate preliminary research on the chemical she inhaled as part of the trial. Their search strategy failed to find material which would have cautioned them against its use (John Hopkins University, 2001; Perkins, 2001; Savulescu & Spriggs, 2002).

Although the investigators used an appropriate database (PubMed), their search strategy was poorly constructed and they did not retrieve those records which would have alerted them to potential difficulties. They also did not search widely enough. They used textbooks on pharmacology and pulmonary medicine and they used search engines such as Google and Yahoo, but there were other online databases they should have searched, in addition to a range of other resources (Perkins, 2001).

This sober illustration depicts a case in which someone may have literally died from a poor search strategy. It provides the caution that social workers also could, in principle, do more harm than good in their research. With this thought as background, this chapter will do three things. It will outline some of the research sources available to social workers (Sources); it will look at some principles for finding information for practice in
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social work (Searching); and it will outline some criteria for evaluating the quality of that information (Selection).

As observed in the previous chapter, there are multiple sources of evidence available to the social worker. This includes empirical evidence, in addition to evidence derived from qualitative studies, professional expertise, judgement, and experience, theoretical knowledge, organisational guidelines, critical reflection, and evidence that arises from the particular practice situation, such as the client’s cultural values, problems, situation, and strengths. This chapter focuses upon finding the research evidence (quantitative and qualitative) and, in particular, the searching of electronic databases and how the quality of such evidence is evaluated.

SOURCES

Rapidly evolving information technologies have given social workers unprecedented access to information resources. At some point, the social work practitioner will be faced with determining which sources will provide access to the most useful material. Squandering time and energy searching in the wrong place is disheartening.

There is little point listing in this chapter a comprehensive range of sources in social work available through the Internet. It is an interesting but discouraging exercise to explore such lists only to find that the organisations and groups no longer exist or the web addresses have changed. There is little that dates a text which includes such a list, so much as this.

Having said all this by way of qualification, below is something akin to a list. It also, however, provides some explanatory material describing the context and the utility of these sources and it has the virtue of identifying websites that are not likely to disappear. It includes sources for systematic reviews and bibliographic databases and concludes with some comment about grey literature. Many of these resources may be familiar and well-utilised. This list does not pretend to be comprehensive. It is presented merely to give an idea of the range of sources available.

Prominent Search Engines

The advent of the Internet has given social workers access to a plethora of resources and types of evidence upon which to base practice. Search engines, such as Google, Alta Vista, and Yahoo, search across the Internet, although no one engine searches the entire Internet, there are no controls over quality, and authorship and currency are not always easy to determine. Using a general search engine is not, therefore, ideal. In fact, Szuchman and Thomlison (2011) take the view that “the Internet sometimes does contain suitable sources, but doing a Google or Yahoo search is likely to waste your time” (p. 64). They then comment on the results of a search on Google for the phrase “healthy aging” and advise that it would be better to have spent the time searching a database, such as PsychInfo, being assured that the material came from “legitimate sources” (p. 64). Nevertheless, one particularly well known Internet search engine is suitable: Google Scholar.

Google Scholar
(www.google.com/scholar)

Released in 2004, this freely accessible web search engine indexes the full text of scholarly literature. It also includes selected web pages that are deemed to be scholarly. The full texts of articles in Google Scholar are not necessarily available freely to all searchers, however. Searchers with access through an institution may be able to freely access material and some records provide links to subscription or purchase options.

Google Scholar does not offer the searching, limiting, and filtering features available in databases such as PubMed (Boeker, Vach, & Motschall, 2013; Bramer, Giustini, Kramer, & Anderson,