Publication and related bias in quantitative health services and delivery research: a multimethod study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Iestyn Williams was a member of the Health Services and Delivery Research Prioritisation Committee (Commissioned) (2015–19). Magdalena Skrybant and Richard J Lilford are also supported by the National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration West Midlands.

Published August 2020
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr08330

Plain English summary

Bias in quantitative health services and delivery research
Health Services and Delivery Research 2020; Vol. 8: No. 33
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr08330

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Plain English summary

This project investigates publication and related bias in health services and delivery research.

Publication bias occurs when not all research evidence is made available. There are different ways publication bias can happen:

- studies with only ‘positive’ results are published
- researchers use different methods to analyse the same data until they get a ‘significant’ or ‘positive’ result
- researchers ‘cherry pick’ findings, reporting only those that are most ‘interesting’ or likely to get published.

In research affecting treatments for patients, issues of publication bias are well known and attempts have been made to ensure that all research evidence is made available. Less is known about publication bias in health services and delivery research, which explores how health services are designed and delivered. If there is publication bias in health services and delivery research, researchers might do research that has already previously been done and decision-makers may not have all the information available to make the best decisions.

What we did

We used various methods to explore publication bias in health services and delivery research, including:

- A systematic review of published evidence on publication bias in health services and delivery research to identify if anyone had looked at this issue before.
- Examination of 200 systematic reviews of evidence in health services and delivery research to see if researchers took any steps to detect publication bias.
- Four in-depth case studies of health services and delivery research systematic reviews in which we highlighted issues in applying existing methods to detect publication bias.
- Analysis of 300 health services and delivery research projects to see which ones were published and which were not.
- Interviews with journal editors, researchers and members of the public about publication bias.

What we found

- Publication bias in health services and delivery research had not been addressed previously.
- Most systematic reviews in health services and delivery research do not include a process for detecting publication bias.
- Studies with ‘positive’ findings are about three times more likely to be published.
Health Services and Delivery Research

ISSN 2050-4349 (Print)
ISSN 2050-4357 (Online)

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 15/71/06. The contractual start date was in January 2017. The final report began editorial review in July 2019 and was accepted for publication in November 2019. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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