

HOW TO ASSESS A JOURNAL ARTICLE (CNIN JAN 2009)

Each year more articles on palliative care research are being published. For example, running the palliative care filter in CareSearch retrieves citations for over 88,000 palliative care journal articles. New research can, and often should, lead to changes in clinical practice. However, not all studies are perfect, so being able to critically assess research findings published in a journal article is an important skill.

Research articles in a journal will often follow a standard format with sections such as introduction, methods, findings and results, and discussion and conclusion. Taking a critical approach to what is written can help to identify any problems with the study's design, analysis and clinical claims. Assessing the credibility of a study can help you decide not only whether the findings are reliable but if they could apply to your patients.

Ask yourself questions such as

- Are the people in the sample typical of the population? For example testing drugs on young fit people may make it difficult to determine their usefulness for frail aged people. If the participants only had cancer diagnoses what does that mean for others in palliative care?
- Were the numbers too small to be meaningful? Sample size affects the type of statistical analysis that needs to be undertaken.
- What scales or instruments did they use? Think about whether the instruments actually measured what was intended.
- Have they included recent references in their paper? There may be other studies and information that deals with the same topic.

Trish Greenhalgh poses five questions that should be thought about when assessing the quality of a medical study in the BMJ article [Assessing the methodological quality of published papers](#).

Health professionals often review research articles as part of a journal club. Reviewing in a group can help to develop skills and increase the available knowledge when assessing the quality of a published study.

Finding out more

- NHS Public Health Resource Unit [Appraisal Tools](#)
- Ingham-Broomfield R [A nurse's guide to the critical reading of research](#) Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing 2008 26(1): 102-109
- Society for Vascular Nursing: [Practical Tips in Starting a Journal Club](#)

CareSearch is an online resource funded by the Department of Health and Ageing to help clinicians find relevant evidence about palliative care. Available now at www.caresearch.com.au

