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Writes



Editorial comment on issues addressed in this month's Essentially MIDIRS...

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Comment by

Sara Wickham Editor

*Citations, chocolate and colons:
what gets research read?*

In this issue of *Essentially MIDIRS*, you'll find an article by Tasha Cooper about the potential benefits of chocolate in pregnancy (Cooper 2012) as well as the first part of our brand new series *The Joy of Information* (Cooper & Roe 2012), and this month's *MIDIRS Writes* picks up a small but potentially important thread that relates to both of these articles.

It began with a conversation in the EM office about why a paper by Rääkkönen *et al* (2004), one of the studies found during Tasha's search on chocolate and childbirth, had been published in a journal, mentioned in news stories in several UK national newspapers and on the BBC website, but had been relatively ignored by the wider academic community since its publication. The initial literature search found no commentaries, editorials or other papers that had mentioned or discussed Rääkkönen *et al* (2004), and continued searching found only a tiny

handful of papers that had cited it, which is somewhat unusual. (In a kind of time-and-space-folds-in-on-itself-and-creates-a-potential-paradox-threatening-the-fabric-of-the-universe-and-warranting-the-appearance-of-Doctor-Who type situation, Tasha went on to discover that I would appear to have been one of the first to cite it in the medical or midwifery literature (Wickham 2005), but this has no relevance on any level other than the cosmic).

This vacuum in the research continuum seemed a bit curious, not to mention unhelpful, especially when one of the tried and tested tools of literature searching is the searching of papers to see what they have cited and then to also find out what has cited them. (This is something that Sandra, the heroine of *The Joy of Information*, will be getting up to over the next episode or two!). Over the past few weeks, we have pondered a lot of possible reasons for why Rääkkönen *et al*

were ignored. Is it to do with journal ratings? Was *Early Human Development* not high-profile or well-regarded enough as a journal? Do impact factors really make a difference? Or it could be because of the topic; perhaps chocolate is seen as a frivolous topic for research and therefore not worth commenting on? We are never going to know what happened in this case, or whether it is simply a coincidence, but some of the research findings we found while pondering these questions are definitely worth sharing.

- Phillips *et al* (1991) found that an article that is cited in the lay press is more likely to be cited in other academic journals. This makes sense; it is extremely difficult to keep up with everything that is published, so I would imagine that many practitioners will be more likely to look up (and then perhaps later cite) a study that they hear about on the radio than one that is buried within a journal that they never get the time to read. It does

mean, as was touched upon last month (Wickham 2012) that, to at least some extent, public relations and publicity can be more important than the quality of the paper.

- Question marks are becoming far more commonly used in the titles of articles (Ball 2009); Jamali & Nikzad (2011) found that articles which ask a question in their title are more likely to be downloaded but less likely to be cited. As Goldacre (2011:1) suggested in a recent blog post on this very topic, 'Maybe question-mark titles are more ambiguous and playful, so you have to download them to see if they're relevant to your work, explaining the mismatch between downloads and citations?'
- Jamali & Nikzad (2011) found that articles with longer titles were downloaded less than articles with shorter titles, but Habibzadeh & Yadollahie (2010) showed longer titles to be associated with higher citation rates. It is thus hard to draw definitive conclusions from this, partly because it seems to vary a bit between scientific, social science, medical or mathematical journals.
- Jamali & Nikzad (2011) also found that the presence of a colon in the title may not be a good idea, as this also leads to fewer citations.
- Amusing titles may also be less popular; a study of articles published in psychology journals found that those with amusing titles received fewer citations (Sagi & Yechiam 2008).

We came to the completely opinion-based conclusion that it may have been the title of Rääkkönen *et al's* (2004) 'Sweet babies' article that was the reason for its low citation rate, with the existence of a colon adding insult to injury, but this is completely unscientific and there is no way of knowing if we are right. It's not exactly directly relevant to practice either; it is highly unlikely that you are going to meet a pregnant woman who wants information about journal citation rates. So why is it worthy of taking up the last couple of pages of your journal? Well, perhaps because it shows that those of us who read, use and cite research (which includes practitioners using research in everyday practice as well as those of us who deal with more of it on a more regular basis) are subject to being more or less likely to read and/or cite a study based on lots of things that have nothing to do with the quality of the research. No matter whether you're a practitioner who has limited time or a student undertaking a written assignment, study titles may turn out to be pretty important in relation to what you're likely to read in full. For this reason, among many others, we're delighted to be introducing

“those of us who read, use and cite research are subject to being more or less likely to read and/or cite a study based on lots of things that have nothing to do with the quality of the research”



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Sandra to you this month (Cooper & Roe 2012) and we look forward to bringing you more of her adventures in literature searching in the hope that it will help you with yours.

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