Language bias and comprehensive meta-analysis of folate for unipolar depression

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Short title:

Folate for unipolar depression
Abstract

Roberts and colleagues recently published a systematic review and meta-analysis of folate for unipolar depression. This was a timely update to previous such analyses, and the authors addressed the importance of comprehensive evidence synthesis to inform treatment guidelines. However, they may also inadvertently demonstrate a potential bias affecting such efforts. A brief search of the CENTRAL database, one searched by the authors themselves, appears to identify at least two further randomised clinical trials suitable for inclusion on the face of it. They seem likely to have been missed as a result of being published in non-English language journals. While the incorporation of these two small additional studies would probably not have modified the results of the review on this occasion, it demonstrates the risk of inadvertent language bias through choice of search terms, and the importance of a comprehensive search strategy. Unconscious biases may affect evidence synthesis, even within the context of systematic reviews.

Keywords

Depression, evidence, meta-analysis, folate
Letter

Roberts and colleagues recently published a systematic review and meta-analysis of folate for unipolar depression (Roberts et al., 2018). This was a timely update to previous such analyses (Taylor et al., 2004), and the authors addressed the importance of comprehensive evidence synthesis to inform treatment guidelines. However, they may also inadvertently demonstrate a potential bias affecting such efforts.

A brief search of the CENTRAL database, one searched by the authors themselves, appears to identify at least two further randomised clinical trials suitable for inclusion on the face of it (Analan et al., 2000; Basoglu et al., 2009). They seem likely to have been missed as a result of being published in non-English language journals. While the incorporation of these two small additional studies would probably not have modified the results of the review on this occasion, it demonstrates the risk of inadvertent language bias through choice of search terms (Grégoire et al., 1995; Moher et al., 2003), and the importance of a comprehensive search strategy. Unconscious biases may affect evidence synthesis, even within the context of systematic reviews.

Declaration of Interests

Dr. Taylor reports personal fees from Sunovion, Otsuka, Lundbeck, outside the submitted work.
References


