Implanon – the single-rod subdermal contraceptive implant.

This relatively new journal is primarily aimed at pharmaceutical physicians, but its Editor-in-Chief, Professor Ronald M. M. Bull, will also be useful to clinicians. Each issue is devoted to examining a single drug, with the intention of doing so in an independent and comprehensive manner. The Editor-in-Chief writes an ‘executive summary’ derived from the review articles on the basis of their extensive clinical experience, but are professionals who are not directly or indirectly associated with the manufacturer in a way that would undermine the independence of view, and a declaration of ‘conflict of interest’ is required to be signed by each author.

The definition for a systematic review was given in an article in the journal in January 2004:

‘A critical synthesis of research evidence, which involves analysis of all available and relevant evidence in a systematic, objective and robust manner.’

However, this article is not so much a systematic review as a monograph, the definition of which is ‘a scholarly book, article or pamphlet on a specific and usually narrow subject’. In many ways it demonstrates the reasons why having specified guidelines is a good idea. 1. What is the research question?

This is not stated explicitly. It could be to answer the question: ‘Is this contraceptive method acceptable, effective and safe?’ If so, then to a large degree the question is answered, but the answers need to be extracted from a large mass of data. The question might have been ‘What is known so far about this method of contraception?’; then again most of the answers are there, but see the caveats highlighted below.

Is there an assessment of the methodological quality of the articles included in the review?

This review includes a summary of the paper by Edwards and Moore[2] that did spell out a superficial, a list of 159 research articles on Implanon – but looking at the abstracts of some, it is very time consuming doing a systematic review! Several are obviously not suitable for a review article and some are repeated references.

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Did the search strategy appear to be exhaustive and comprehensive?

This is unknown but seems unlikely with only 39 references.

3. Is there a protocol outlining the review specifications? How were sources of literature identified?

The authors do not give their inclusion criteria or their searching protocol, so that it is not possible to judge for degree of bias in selection of papers or the method used for selecting the articles. A superficial search, a list of 159 research articles on Implanon – but looking at the abstracts of some, it is very time consuming doing a systematic review! Several are obviously not suitable for a review article and some are repeated references.

4. Is there an assessment of the methodological quality of the articles included in the review?

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5. Was a data extraction form used? Was there an audit of the data?

This is unknown but seems unlikely with only 39 references.

6. Were the data summarised and tabulated with synthesis of results?

Much of the data were summarised but is difficult to access in a systematic way.

7. Is the interpretation valid and the implications for practice considered?

The implications for practice are not contentious and contain no surprises.

In summary, this article may provide a useful resource for those who wish to find information on Implanon gathered together in a single source. It is not explicitly described by the authors or the title whether they intend the review articles to be of local, national or international interest. It is not possible to answer the question of ‘What is known so far about this method of contraception?’; then again most of the answers are there, but see the caveats highlighted below.

3. French S, Gallo PH, Macdonald IA, et al. Implantable contraceptives (subdermal implants and hormonally impregnated systems) versus other forms of reversible contraceptives as effective methods of preventing pregnancy, so a systematic review will be available in due course.

References