



Knowledge and Library Services (KLS)

Impact stories

Title: A KLS literature search enabled the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition to update a scientific risk assessment at speed.

User testimonial: *“The findings of the literature search allowed the secretariat of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) to quickly provide the relevant data to members of the SACN Working Group. This enabled them to consider and assess the data in a timely fashion”.* **Mamta Singh, SACN secretariat**

Challenge: In 2006, SACN, which advises UK Governments on nutritional issues which affect wider public health policy, recommended mandatory folic acid fortification of flour to reduce the risk of pregnancies affected by neural tube defects (NTD). In a further review in 2009, SACN concluded that while there were uncertainties regarding folic acid and cancer risk, its previous recommendation still applied. However, no action was taken to implement mandatory folic acid fortification in the UK.

In 2016, ten years after its previous full risk assessment, SACN was asked by Food Standards Scotland (FSS) to consider whether its previous advice remained valid because, in the absence of any action in the UK, Scottish Ministers were considering whether to proceed unilaterally with mandatory folic acid fortification in Scotland.

This required literature searches to identify relevant research on folic acid and health outcomes which had been published since SACN's full risk assessment in 2006.

The main challenge was the sheer volume of research that had been published since the evidence on the health outcomes associated with folic acid had previously been considered by SACN.

Solution: Although other international organisations had considered the evidence base in the interim, none were sufficiently comprehensive.

All health outcomes associated positively or adversely with folic acid supplementation were initially included. Due to the limited time available for completing the review and because the beneficial effect of folic acid in NTD risk reduction is well established, it was subsequently agreed to only consider potential adverse effects of folic acid.

Three consecutive searches were undertaken: the first was limited to meta-analyses and systematic reviews, the second was limited to pooled analyses and the third combined the previous searches and removed a database review filter which had resulted in a number of important studies not being identified. The results of all three searches were then combined.

A different approach was required for one of the health outcomes, where primary studies were considered because the evidence base was less extensive than for the other health outcomes considered.

Impact: Fifty-one systematic reviews/meta-analyses and 23 individual studies were identified.

A focused approach allowed conclusions to be drawn at speed and enabled SACN to provide advice to FSS relatively quickly.

SACN was able to conclude that the evidence it had considered did not provide a substantial basis for changing its previous recommendation for mandatory folic acid fortification of flour.

Success factors: Colleagues from the KLS team were very helpful and thorough and provided the SACN team with very good advice for a successful and speedy literature search. We were confident that the literature search had identified all the relevant studies for SACN's risk assessment.

KLS provides an extremely valuable resource for PHE.

Lessons:

To seek advice and involve colleagues from KLS at an early stage of any future risk assessments conducted by SACN.

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