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Applying GRADE to included studies in published Cochrane Reviews – experience from a national guideline on the pharmacological management of neuropathic pain

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Background: Results, with or without meta-analysis, from the Cochrane Systematic Reviews are commonly used as part of the evidence base for clinical guideline development.

Purpose: To assess the applicability and practicality of applying GRADE to the included studies in published Cochrane Reviews.

Methods: Ten Cochrane Reviews were identified as relevant for a national guideline on the pharmacological management of neuropathic pain. The GRADE approach was applied to relevant evidence from the Cochrane Reviews when assessing and summarising the evidence for the neuropathic pain guideline.

Results: Several issues arose when extracting and adapting the findings from the ten Cochrane Reviews for the GRADE rating system in the neuropathic pain guideline. Overall, the findings and 'Characteristics of Included Studies' tables from the Cochrane Reviews did not provide adequate or sufficient information for the use of the GRADE rating system. For example, there were inconsistencies in the level of reporting between reviews; for example, study design, study participants, quality rating, undesirable outcomes such as adverse effects. The final findings of the issues and how it affected the guideline development process will be presented in the conference.

Discussion: There are many technical and practical challenges in applying GRADE to included studies in published Cochrane Reviews. However, it is anticipated that as more Cochrane reviews use GRADE to assess and summarise included studies, such issues may become less problematic over time.