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The quality of clinical practice guidelines in the last two decades: an overview of reviews

Pablo Alonso-Coello^{1,2}, Affan Ifran³, Ivan Sola¹, Jako Burgers^{4,5}, Mario Delgado-Noguera^{6,7}, David Rigau¹, Montserrat Tort¹, Xavier Bonfill¹, Holger Schunemann⁸

¹Iberoamerican Cochrane Center, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, ²Ciber de Epidemiología y Salud Pública (CIBERESP), Barcelona, Spain, ³Interactive Research and Development, The Indus Hospital., Karachi, Pakistan, ⁴Dutch Institute for Healthcare Improvement CBO, Utrecht, Netherlands, ⁵Scientific Institute for Quality of Healthcare (IQ healthcare), Radboud University Medical Centre, Nijmegen, Netherlands, ⁶of Pediatrics, University of Cauca, Cauca, Colombia, ⁷Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Gynecology and Preventive Medicine Departments, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, ⁸Department of Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Background: Despite the dissemination and wide acceptance of the AGREE Instrument, published in 2003, concerns about suboptimal quality of clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) remain. The aim of this study was to review the quality of CPGs across a wide range of health care topics published since 1980.

Methods: We conducted a literature search in MEDLINE to identify publications assessing the quality of CPGs with the AGREE instrument. For the included guidelines in each original study we gathered data about the year of publication, institution, country, health care topic, AGREE score per domain, and overall assessment (recommended, recommended with provisos and not recommended).

Results: In total 42 reviews reporting on 626 guidelines were included, with a median of 25 CPGs assessed in each review. Most guidelines were published in the last 10 years and mainly in Europe (42%) and North America (41%). The mean scores were acceptable for domain 'Scope and purpose' (64%; SD=28.3) and 'Clarity and presentation' (60%; SD=24.7), moderate for domain 'Rigor of development' (43%; SD=26.0), and low for the other domains (Stakeholder involvement 35%; SD=22.5, Editorial independence 30%; SD=27.3 and Applicability 22%; SD=21.4). From those guidelines that also included an overall assessment, 62% (168/270) were recommended or recommended with provisos. There was a significant improvement over time for all domains except 'Editorial independence'. The improvement started before publication of the AGREE Instrument.

Conclusions: Our review shows that while the quality of CPGs over the last two decades was moderate to low there has been a significant increase in the quality over time. However, there remains room for improvement for most of the domains. Adherence to good guideline development practice as reflected in the AGREE criteria is needed to improve guideline quality, and ultimately serve patients.