

AUDIT OR RESEARCH

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Health professionals are expected to undertake audit and service evaluation as part of quality assurance. These usually involve minimal additional risk, burden or intrusion for participants. It is important to determine at an early stage whether a project is audit or research, and sometimes that is not as easy as it seems. The decision will determine the framework in which the study is undertaken. In the UK, the Health Research Authority (HRA) has developed a decision tool to help decide whether your project is classified as research (<http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/>). This tool crystallises the differentiation between audit and research to three overarching questions: 1 Are the participants in your study randomised to different groups? 2 Does your study protocol demand changing treatment/ care/services from accepted standards for any of the patients/service users involved? 3 Is your study designed to produce generalisable or transferable findings? - Although the first two questions are simple to comprehend, the third can create some confusion at times. The HRA states that, in this context, 'generalisable' means the findings can be reliably extrapolated from the study to a broader population of patients/service users and/or applied to settings or contexts other than those in which they were tested. The majority of audits can be assumed to be hypothesis generating as they would require subsequent prospective testing in a new population before findings could be considered as new 'evidence' - as such they do not fulfil this generalisability criterion. Finally, in this context, 'transferable' means that the findings of a qualitative study can be assumed to be applicable to a similar context or setting. Most qualitative studies are not usually generalisable - but can quite often be considered to be transferable. Further useful information on classifying your proposed project can be found in the HRA leaflet 'Differentiating clinical audit, service evaluation, research and usual practice/surveillance work in public health' (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/docs/DefiningResearchTable_Oct2017-1.pdf).

How to review a journal article and determine its value

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