Scoping reviews have become a popular approach used in healthcare for synthesising existing evidence. Unlike traditional approaches to knowledge synthesis, such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, scoping reviews aim to describe the ‘bigger picture’ (Campbell et al 2023) and provide a comprehensive overview of the published literature on a particular subject. Their primary objective is to identify, review and clarify the breadth and nature of the evidence. In healthcare, scoping reviews are invaluable since they capture diverse types of evidence, ranging from primary research to conceptual and theoretical studies.

This article aims to provide guidance for nurses who plan to undertake a scoping review. It outlines a step-by-step guide to explain the process of scoping the literature, then discusses the foundational evidence that underpins this activity.

Preparation
» Formulate a research question that is broad, exploratory and constructed in such a way as to guide and facilitate a preliminary search of the literature to establish what has been published on the chosen subject. Examples of suitably broad research questions that could be used in a scoping review include: ‘what is known about leadership and wisdom?’ or ‘what is known about resilient leadership?’.

» Establish expansive inclusion criteria that enable the search to cover a wide range and type of literature, including theoretical, conceptual and empirical articles. Other sources such as grey literature, which includes reports, guidelines and policies, may also be included. Box 1 lists the types of literature that may be included in a scoping review.

Rationale and key points
Scoping reviews have become a popular approach for exploring what literature has been published on a particular field of interest. They can enable nurses to gain an overview of the contemporary evidence base relating to a practice area, treatment or specific patient demographic, for example. This article provides a concise guide for nurses planning to undertake a scoping review, explaining the various steps involved.

» Scoping reviews are classified as ‘big picture’ reviews used for knowledge synthesis, and their primary objective is to identify, review and clarify the breadth and nature of the evidence.

» A well-structured scoping review can be useful for determining the emerging evidence on a subject and may act as a useful precursor to a systematic review.

» Undertaking a scoping review involves identifying a focus, selecting the pertinent evidence, synthesising that evidence and reporting the findings.

Reflective activity
‘How to’ articles can help to update your practice and ensure it remains evidence-based. Apply this article to your practice. Reflect on and write a short account of:

» How this article might improve your practice when undertaking a scoping review.

» How you could use this information to educate nursing students and colleagues on the appropriate techniques and evidence base required for scoping the literature.

How to undertake a scoping review
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Scoping reviews have become a popular approach used in healthcare for synthesising existing evidence. Unlike traditional approaches to knowledge synthesis, such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, scoping reviews aim to describe the ‘bigger picture’ (Campbell et al 2023) and provide a comprehensive overview of the published literature on a particular subject. Their primary objective is to identify, review and clarify the breadth and nature of the evidence. In healthcare, scoping reviews are invaluable since they capture diverse types of evidence, ranging from primary research to conceptual and theoretical studies.

This article aims to provide guidance for nurses who plan to undertake a scoping review. It outlines a step-by-step guide to explain the process of scoping the literature, then discusses the foundational evidence that underpins this activity.
Construct a data extraction template for primary and secondary research

Box 1. Types of literature that may be included in a scoping review

- Primary research
- Secondary research
- Book chapters
- Editorials
- Discussion articles
- Public body or government guidelines
- Policy documents
- Working papers
- Project reports
- Conference proceedings and papers
- Dissertations and theses
- Expert opinions
- Case law
- Legislation
- Professional codes
- Newspaper reports
- Blogs
- Webpages

Box 2. Components of a data extraction template for primary and secondary research

- Author
- Year
- Title of evidence or source
- Country
- Location and/or context
- Aim
- Study design
- Population
- Sample size
- Demographic details
- Data collection methods
- Data analysis methods
- Key results or findings
- Recommendations
- Limitations

Box 3. Identifying relevant literature

1. Conduct searches of the published evidence via the key search terms.
2. Record details of the search strategy used to strengthen the transparency of the review.
3. Save the search results using a citation management tool such as Endnote or RefWorks. At this stage, this is simply to store the sources identified.
4. Using a citation management tool means that the sources finally selected can be easily retrieved to form a reference list at the end of the review.
5. Chart the data collated by using the data extraction template to gather and record the main details about each article. This in-depth information can be recorded in a narrative format, where the studies reviewed are logically described according to the research question and objectives of the scoping review. This foundational stage should capture all the important items of information that will later form the main body of the scoping review.
6. Having reviewed and extracted the information from the selected articles, the data can be synthesised. Unlike the in-depth data extraction involved in the previous stage, synthesis entails summarising the data and identifying broad themes, thereby providing a ‘snapshot’ of all the evidence reviewed.
7. Present the extracted data visually using tables, charts or diagrams. This can enable an overview of the literature landscape to emerge, so that patterns, trends and deficits in the data can be identified.
8. At this stage of the review, consult other experts in the field of interest, such as lecturers and clinical nurse specialist colleagues, for further input. These experts can ensure that the data gathered addresses the focus of the scoping review and can establish if there are any outstanding omissions. This may be an iterative process whereby you return to the expert for consultation until you are satisfied that the subject has been covered in detail.
9. Having completed a review and synthesis of the selected literature sources, the data should be presented in a draft report. Consider the use of reporting guidelines for scoping reviews such as the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR). This tool contains 20 essential reporting items and two optional items to include when completing a scoping review, and provides

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a framework for ensuring clarity and consistency in reporting (Sarkis-Onofre et al 2021). Examples of the 22 items included in the PRISMA-ScR include (Tricco et al 2018):

- Describe all information sources in the search.
- Describe the methods of charting data from the included sources of evidence.
- Summarise the main results (including an overview of concepts, themes and types of evidence available), link to the review questions and objectives, and consider the relevance to key groups.

10. For the final draft report of the scoping review, follow a format that includes an introduction and background, the methods applied, the findings and a discussion. The report should end with an overall conclusion.

11. When preparing to publish the scoping review, consult the author submission guidelines of your selected journal. Most journals will provide online information on writing for publication, for example the RCNi guidance for authors can be accessed at: rcni.com/publish-with-rcni/author-guide-downloads/writing-and-submitting-articles-for-publication-with-rcni-85606

Table 1. Main differences between scoping reviews and systematic reviews

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<th>Scoping review</th>
<th>Systematic review</th>
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| Visually depicts the literature and identifies key themes and gaps to aid future research, as well as assisting the nurse to ascertain whether there is any merit in undertaking a full systematic review. Munn et al (2022) suggested that scoping reviews have an important role in summarising and disseminating research findings within a body of evidence, especially when the evidence is diverse or intricate. For nurses, this approach can advance their knowledge and awareness of a subject by enabling them to map the evidence and describe the relevant literature (Pollock et al 2021). While scoping reviews provide valuable insights, several limitations can affect their reliability. Maggio et al (2021) found deficiencies in scoping reviews that explored the subject of medical education, including clinical practice (Giuffrida et al 2023), workforce planning (Tancred et al 2024), nurse education (van Kraaij et al 2023) and healthcare system outcomes (Connor et al 2023). Since the introduction of this approach, the volume of scoping reviews published in medical education journals has increased 42-fold (Maggio et al 2021).

First proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) and further developed by Levac et al (2010), the scoping review is classified as one of the newer methodologies and belongs to the family of ‘big picture’ reviews used for knowledge synthesis. In contrast to systematic reviews, which focus on addressing a specific research question, scoping reviews are exploratory in nature (Khalil et al 2024).

Table 1 summarises the main differences between scoping reviews and systematic reviews. Scoping reviews adopt a wider approach to reviewing the evidence than systematic reviews, establishing an overview of what has been published on a given subject (Munn et al 2018). For this reason, scoping reviews can include additional evidence such as conference proceedings and editorials in addition to primary and secondary research (Box 1). Therefore, scoping reviews are often seen as a precursor to a systematic review of the literature on a particular subject.

Scoping reviews can have significant benefits for nurses. For example, by undertaking a scoping review, it is possible to determine the breadth and nature of available research on a subject (Mak and Thomas 2022). Additionally, scoping the literature supports the identification of any knowledge gaps to aid future research, as well as assisting the nurse to ascertain whether there is any merit in undertaking a full systematic review. Munn et al (2022) suggested that scoping reviews have an important role in summarising and disseminating research findings within a body of evidence, especially when the evidence is diverse or intricate. For nurses, this approach can advance their knowledge and awareness of a subject by enabling them to map the evidence and describe the relevant literature (Pollock et al 2021). While scoping reviews provide valuable insights, several limitations can affect their reliability. Maggio et al (2021) found deficiencies in scoping reviews that explored the subject of medical education.
including a lack of adherence to checklists, issues with transparency and no inclusion of the PRISMA-ScR. In addition, Pham et al. (2014) cited drawbacks related to the time required to conduct scoping reviews and the fact that they are often undertaken as standalone projects rather than being a preliminary step in larger research projects. Another issue with scoping reviews is that they can include material that is not necessarily quality appraised or peer reviewed (Peterson et al. 2017). Moreover, Woo et al. (2023) conducted a large-scale systematic review of scoping reviews in nursing journals, finding that despite an adherence to checklists, there were shortcomings in accessible protocols, critical appraisal data, selection strategy details and data extraction processes. These collective limitations emphasise the need for improved transparency, methodological rigour and a more standardised approach to the execution of scoping reviews.

Despite these limitations, efforts have been made to enhance the rigour of scoping reviews, specifically addressing concerns related to data extraction and analysis. The Joanna Briggs Institute guidance for conducting scoping reviews aims to strengthen this methodology (Peters et al. 2020). This guidance was designed to elucidate the essential components required to conduct a comprehensive scoping review. Consequently, its implementation has the potential to enhance the credibility and applicability of scoping reviews, contributing to the overall advancement of evidence synthesis methodologies (Pollock et al. 2023).

For nurses, scoping reviews can be a useful methodological approach for delineating the evidence base on a subject.

This approach not only ensures a thorough exploration of the existing literature, but also serves as a guide for navigating the complex landscape of healthcare knowledge.

By scoping the literature, nurses can gain a ‘panoramic view’ of the evidence, enabling them to identify gaps, trends and emerging areas in their practice. This systematic exploration aligns nursing practice with the latest healthcare advancements and contributes to a culture of evidence-based care. Furthermore, the iterative nature of scoping reviews promotes collaboration between nurses and other experts in the field of interest, which ensures diverse perspectives.

By engaging in scoping reviews, nurses can enhance their knowledge and skills as well as contributing to the ongoing development of evidence-based healthcare, thereby promoting high-quality patient care.

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