Online cancer support groups: a review of the research literature
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CRD summary
This review explored the current research on online cancer support groups (OCSGs). The authors’ conclusions appropriately focused on the poor quality of the evidence base for OCSGs and the lack of patient outcomes. There is a need for large randomised controlled trials on the efficacy of online support, using outcomes such as quality of life, mood disturbances and coping.

Authors’ objectives
To explore the current research on online cancer support groups (OCSGs).

Searching
MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO were searched from 1990 to 2002, using the search terms listed in the review.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
All study designs appeared to be eligible for inclusion. Theoretical articles were not included.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies of OCSGs were eligible for inclusion.

Participants included in the review
Studies that included adult cancer patients or their care givers were eligible for inclusion.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The review was not restricted to any specific outcome of OCSGs. One study reported depression rates as an outcome.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
Six reviewers individually assessed a subset of references and full papers for inclusion.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
The authors did not state how many reviewers performed the data extraction. Study characteristics and major findings were extracted.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were combined in a narrative.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Only one study was relevant for discussion in this abstract, therefore the differences between studies is irrelevant. However, differences between the studies were discussed and presented in tabular format.
Results of the review
Ten studies were included. They were all descriptive studies.

Only descriptive studies were identified, all of which used convenience samples. The studies mainly described the content of OCSGs, the extent of use, and patient reaction or views of helpfulness.

One pilot study found that 92% of participants using OCSGs suffered from depression compared with 0% in the face-to-face support groups, as measured by the Centres for Epidemiological Study-Depression scale. Participants using the online support groups were found to receive significantly more active treatment than those in the face-to-face group.

Authors’ conclusions
The lack of experimental research and random selection to support the efficacy of OCSGs imposes restrictions on generalising the findings to general nursing practice.

CRD commentary
The review question was clear in terms of the intervention alone. The review was not specific about what aspect of OCSGs it was interested in and it covered a range of issues, such as the type of information and support accessed and the characteristics of those patients that accessed the service. Relevant databases were searched for published literature, but no attempt was made to identify unpublished literature. Potential publication bias was not assessed and it was unclear whether the authors included foreign language papers. The methods used to minimise bias in the study selection and data extraction processes were not reported.

The authors’ conclusions appropriately focused on the poor quality of the evidence base for OCSGs and the lack of patient outcomes.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors did not state any implications for practice.

Research: The authors stated that large randomised and controlled trials focusing on the efficacy of online support and patient outcomes are needed. These should include heterogeneous samples representing ethnic minorities, different age groups, diverse cancer types, and men. Short- and long-term benefits on quality of life, mood disturbances and coping need to be evaluated. Possible harm caused by online groups, such as isolation and depression, also need investigating.

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.