Part 2: Forming a Clinical Question and Subsequent Search Query

Here is a short scenario.

We know from experience or background sources that there are several treatments that have should promise in mild to moderate depression such as:

- Prescription antidepressant drugs: tricyclic antidepressants, ssris , monoamine oxidase inhibitors, etc.
- St John's Wort
- Exercise

We want to turn this scenario into a question.

After consider the needs and desires of the female patient who has adamantly stated that she does not want to take prescription drugs for this and is not in a position to add more exercise to an already busy schedule, we find St Johns Wort an intriguing option.

Now we have the makings of a PICO:

- P or Patient and Problem is an adult 70 yo female with mild to moderate depression
- I or Intervention is St Johns Wort
- C or Comparison is none
- O or Outcome is a reduction in the duration of symptoms

Many proponents of EBM like to add a few more letters to the PICO acronym – T and T. The first T asks what type of scenario this is: by scenario, we mean is it a

- Therapy
- Prevention
- Etiology or Harm
- Diagnostic
- Etc.

In our case, this is clearly a Therapy. The second T asks for the type of trial that will best answer the clinical question. Since we are dealing with the therapy scenario, we want to build our case based on systematic reviews of randomized controlled trials.

Now that we have our PICO-TT, we are ready to build a good search query.

Normally we suggest that you generally search with the P and I concepts (of your PICO). If you do have a Comparison, you can narrow your results by adding terms that match that concept. It is fairly uncommon to search using the terms from the outcome, unless the outcome is a specific adverse effect or unusual consequence caused by the intervention.

So here are our terms; be sure to consider synonyms and alternative spellings. You are trying to capture all the variations that authors may use. You may want to take a look at PubMed's MeSH database for terms to search.

P – depression, depressive disorder, mood disorder, affective disorder

I – St Johns Wort, St John's Wort, hypericum

Now we can convert our terms into a logical search strategy

 Remember to:

- place an OR between synonyms of the same concept and surround concept terms with parentheses
- place an AND between concepts