

Overviews of reviews (an overview)

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Our context: the Department of Health (DH) reviews facility for policy development & implementation

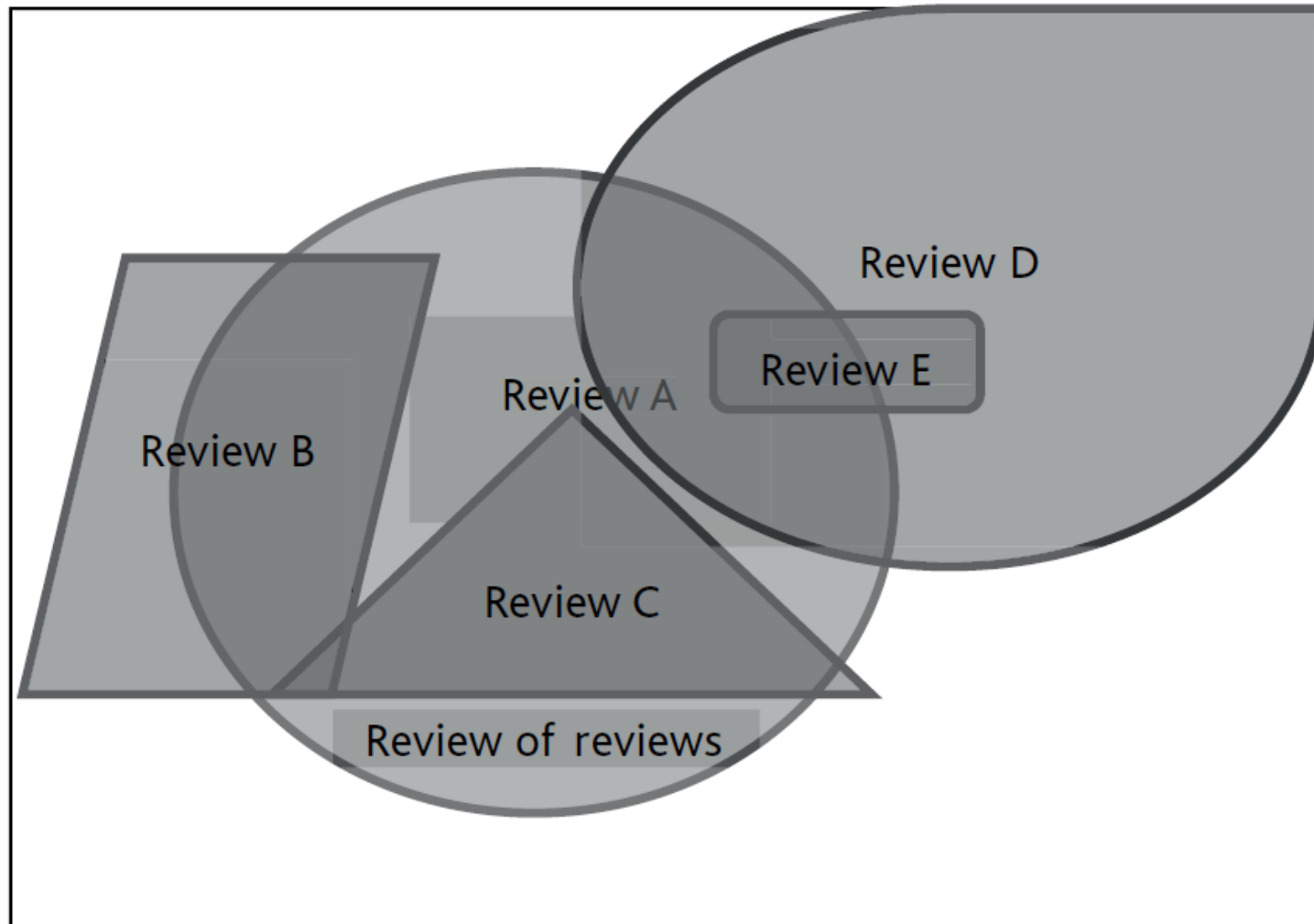
- Since 1995 our aim has been to address the needs of DH Policy Research Programme:
 - Knowledge base of high quality research for policies directed at improving population health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities
 - Ensure that policy decision-making can be informed by ‘all available and robust scientific evidence’
 - Has now grown into a major DH investment



Challenges in reviewing reviews

- Dual layers of quality assessment (primary studies and review itself)
- Identifying and handling overlap of primary studies between reviews
- Reviews of reviews are more likely to be out of date than a new systematic review
- Reviews may not present the relevant data on the problem in *your* overview
 - May end up doing new data extraction anyway
- Difficult to conduct proper synthesis
 - And account for divergent findings
- Scope of reviews & overviews is unlikely to match 100% (next slide)

Figure 1: fit between the scope of the RoR and the reviews it contains





But they can still be worth doing

- They can be the only way of addressing broad questions at speed
- They can give us (relatively) quick answers
- It's possible to 'fill in the gaps' with additional primary research

Final thoughts

- Need to bear in mind that they are quite different to systematic reviews of primary research
- The type of synthesis is qualitatively different:
 - Identifying relevant reviews
 - Checking their reliability
 - Mediating their findings (i.e. not synthesising)
- Can give an authoritative overview of the area in question, but this cannot be guaranteed
- **But we only do them when all other options have been explored!**

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Caird J, Sutcliffe K, Kwan I, Dickson K, Thomas J (2015) Mediating policy-relevant evidence at speed: are systematic reviews of systematic reviews a useful approach?

Evidence & Policy 11 (1):81-97.

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