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Searching in MEDLINE

THE main difficulty with MEDLINE is its size. It encompasses descriptions of more than 13 million articles in 4,800 journals dating back to 1966. (PubMed, which consists of MEDLINE plus additional citations, is slightly larger.) Citations containing the information you want to find are probably indexed in MEDLINE, but finding them can be difficult. A search strategy that is too broadly focused will produce an extremely long list of citations, most of which will be unrelated to the question at hand. On the other hand, a search strategy that *seems* specific in its focus—but is flawed in its construction—will give the impression that little is known about the topic in question. The key to asking useful questions of this huge and exquisitely organized database is an appreciation of how its contents are indexed, an overview of which is provided in this chapter.

Like all databases, MEDLINE has a separate *field* for each “data element”—consider them as *indexes* and the index terms that go in them. Author names go in the *Author index*, article titles go in the *Title index*, subject headings go in the *Main Heading (MeSH Terms) index*, publication types go in the *Publication Type index*, and so on. The indexes that will be discussed in this chapter are listed in Table 2-1. Index terms can be used in any combination (and from any combination of indexes) to construct the sort of Boolean searches that were described in Chapter 1. For example, you could search for the intersection of two MeSH terms, or the intersection of a journal title and an author’s name. Some of these possibilities will be illustrated in this chapter.