

Staying Up to Date and Managing Information Overload

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The Challenge

As medical educators, we strive to implement up-to-date evidence-based practices in our teaching, assessment, and research endeavors. One way to stay current in our field is to read the literature. While staying current seems straightforward, the multiple sources, varied formats, and sheer volume of available readings can easily lead to information overload—or to a decision *not* to read at all.¹ To avoid information overload and efficiently separate the wheat from the chaff, strategies for curating the literature are needed.

What is Known

To help mitigate information overload, individuals have turned to strategies for managing and filtering the onslaught of available information. At the center of this strategy is finding the sources that identify the most relevant literature specific to your needs and interests. Strategies vary depending on a person's individual information needs and personal preferences. Ironically, the very technology that is partly responsible for information overload can help manage it.² This Rip Out outlines several tools and strategies for keeping current with the medical education literature, including tips for filtering without becoming overwhelmed.

What You Can Start TODAY

1. **Work with a medical librarian to setup alerts.** In our experience, librarians are an underutilized resource. Seek out your local medical librarian and ask him/her to setup medical education alerts. Alerts are pushed to users via email and can be created using database tools like PubMed³ or Scopus, which allow for customized alerts on specific topics across journals. Alternatively, alerts can be created within a given journal: most journals will email you an electronic table of contents when a new issue is published. *Filter Tip:* Ask the librarian to setup a few alerts; unsubscribe if the number of alert emails becomes too much.
2. **Subscribe to a medical education listserv or blog that aggregates the literature.** A listserv is an electronic mailing list that pushes information to its subscribers. In medical education, there are several listservs and blogs that consolidate and distribute relevant content, such as DR-ED⁴ or DR MERL⁵. *Filter Tip:* Test drive a few listservs or blogs but do not hesitate to unsubscribe if the content does not fit your needs.
3. **Create a Twitter account.** Twitter is a social networking tool used increasingly by medical educators and researchers to post and interact with short communications called “tweets.” Using hashtags (keywords or phrases that describe a topic) users can easily sort content. Popular medical education hashtags include #MedEd, #FOAMed, and #GME. Once you establish an account, you can tailor the tweets pushed to you by following your favorite scholars and journals to see what they are reading/publishing. *Filter Tip:* Selectively follow Twitter accounts and “unfollow” accounts if those tweets seem irrelevant or too frequent.
4. **Identify “best of” lists and review articles.** Many journals and professional organizations create curated lists of high-quality articles, so-called “best of” or “editor’s picks” articles. Seek out such lists including *Medical Education’s* Editor’s Choice articles and Sullivan’s “Resources for Clinicians Becoming Clinician Educators”⁶. You can also find review articles relevant to your interest area and scour its reference list for articles on a specific topic. *Filter Tip:* Some topics are covered in several curated lists and/or review articles (eg, there are 30+ reviews on work hours alone). Start off by examining articles from only one or two curated lists or reviews. Remember you do not need to read everything.
5. **Volunteer to peer review for journals and conferences.** As a peer reviewer you will be exposed to the latest educational research and innovations, which can help you stay up to date and excited about relevant medical education topics. *Filter Tip:* When setting up your reviewer account, be very specific about the topics and types of manuscripts you are willing to review.

What You Can Do LONG TERM

1. **Go beyond journal articles.** Increasingly, authors and educators are using alternate communication methods to disseminate and discuss their work, such as podcasts, blogs, audio books, and author interviews. *Filter Tip:* Hone in on alternate communication methods that fit your routines. Use your commute or exercise time to listen to a medical education podcast (eg, [KeyLIME⁷]) or to an audio book.
2. **Attend scientific meetings in-person and virtually.** Medical education related meetings provide opportunities to encounter cutting-edge educational research and innovations. *Filter Tip:* In advance, review session options in the meeting program and strategically plan what you will attend. If available, familiarize yourself with the meeting app, which often features the capability to search by topic and includes presentation materials, both of which can help you narrow down your attendance choices.
3. **Adopt a reference manager.** Reference managers (eg, Zotero, EndNote, Mendeley) can serve as your personal reference library, helping to keep track of and organize references. Many reference managers are free and allow you to store full-text copies of articles. *Filter Tip:* Consult with your librarian to select the manager and meaningfully organize the references (eg, by project, topic area, or other searchable group).
4. **Setup a Google Scholar Citation account.** Google Scholar Citations allows you to track articles from specific authors. It will email you the details of any articles the authors publish and articles that cite the authors' work. *Filter Tip:* As you begin publishing your own scholarship, you can follow citations to your articles as a starting point. Once you are comfortable with the volume of email alerts received, you can then setup additional alerts to notify you when your favorite authors have published.
5. **Enlist your human network and start a journal club.** Ask your colleagues how they stay up to date and manage information overload. Consider starting a journal club with your colleagues and/or motivated trainees who want to learn more about medical education. *Filter Tip:* Remember, what works for one colleague may not work for you. Try out several approaches and be open to mixing and matching strategies until you figure out what works best.

References and Resources

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