Protocol

Reporting E-Delphi Studies (REDS) in health research: development of a preferred items checklist

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Introduction

The Delphi method has been employed in many areas of health research.(1) It is defined as a multi-staged survey among an anonymised panel of independent participants, interspersed by controlled feedback. Each stage, commonly designated as a round, builds on the previous one; the purpose is generally to achieve consensus on the topic under scrutiny. The panel is comprised of experts, who may include "any individual with relevant knowledge and experience of a particular topic.",(2) when appropriate panels may include expert patients and carers.

Standardised guidelines for reporting, defined as “a checklist, flow diagram, or explicit text to guide authors in reporting a specific type of research, developed using explicit methodology”,(3) are available for numerous study designs.(4) They are acknowledged as important in helping reviewers and readers in assessing research quality; if considered during an early phase of a study, they may also contribute to a more transparent and/or rigorous design.
A research guideline for Delphi studies was published in 2000. While offering reporting guidelines, this work provides mainly a reflection on the appropriateness of using the Delphi method, its preparation, data collection and analysis. It was based on the authors’ experience and dilemmas when using and reporting these studies, informed by a narrative review. Little attention was paid to the electronic Delphi, or e-Delphi, which in our digital age, commonly replaces its traditional paper counterpart.

Guidance on reporting the Delphi method for selecting healthcare quality indicators is also available, but many Delphi studies in health research are outside this scope. For example, Delphi studies have been used in numerous other topics, such as defining and prioritising barriers or facilitators to interventions or practice changes, developing consensus statements for diseases and drug-therapy, deriving questionnaire items, determining different policy options or planning their outcomes.

Finally, guidance has been offered to develop reporting guidelines, in an attempt to overcome inappropriate processes. Thus, there is a need to develop new reporting guidance for electronic Delphi studies using commonly accepted and robust methods.

Our aim is to fill this gap by developing preferred reporting items for e-Delphi studies in health research.

Methods

An overview of the methods, adapted from the steps recommended by Moher et al., is depicted in Figure 1.

As part of the initial steps, we will conduct a systematic review on the use of the e-Delphi, with the aim of critically appraising, synthesizing and presenting the available evidence on this method in health research. We decided to focus on the e-Delphi to narrow the scope of the systematic review; additionally, this modality is increasingly adopted.

To help with developing the preferred items checklist we plan to conduct an e-Delphi study. To participate in the e-Delphi in the role of experts we envisage inviting corresponding authors of articles included in the systematic review, editors of the journals in which these studies were published and authors of methodological texts on
the Delphi. Statisticians may also be considered for this expert panel. Content experts should comprise at least a quarter of the panel. (3)

**Figure 1 Methods to develop a preferred item checklist for e-Delphi studies**

Existing expertise in team will be important to successfully carry out this project, particularly in what respects to Delphi studies (9,11–16) and systematic reviews (17–20). External funding will be sought as part of the initial steps.

**References**


