

**DEVELOPING AND
IMPLEMENTING A REPORTING
GUIDELINES POLICY:**

NOTES FROM A SMALL JOURNAL

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OVERVIEW

A short summary of the experiences of a mid-sized biomedical journal

- Policy development and implementation
- Barriers and Confounders
- 9 steps to launching a comprehensive policy



HEADACHE'S POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

- *Headache* adopted mandatory adherence to multiple reporting guideline criteria
 - 45% of journals endorsing CONSORT = mandatory (*Headache* internal study, 2010)
- Authors must upload completed reporting guideline checklist with their submission
 - Only 25% of CONSORT endorsers required upload of completed checklist with submission (*Headache* internal study, 2010)
- Endorsed 7 guidelines plus 2 created by *Headache*
 - 63% of CONSORT endorsers adopted additional guidelines
- Stated goal: provide authors and reviewers with the tools to ensure we offered uniformly better reporting standards

HEADACHE'S POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

- Authors directed to download the appropriate reporting checklist from within our online submission system
 - We host Word versions of checklists
 - Authors must upload checklist as part of their submission
- Not ideal: authors unaware of reporting guideline requirements until they begin the submission process
 - True for authors that fail to read our Instructions for Authors
 - We are certain few authors go back and correct omissions at submission stage
- We provide the checklists to Editors and Reviewers
 - Recently also appointed a methodological consultant to thoroughly assess for compliance
 - Not confident all Editorial Board members and, especially, Reviewers know how best to use the reporting checklists

HEADACHE'S POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

4 years since launch of policy. In that time:

- No complaints that the checklists are burdensome
 - No decrease in submissions
 - Not noticed any change in non-compliance rates
- Anecdotally, still high levels of wrong reporting checklists selected or filled out incorrectly
 - Checklists sometimes bear no reality to what we find in the article
- Our two rival titles have since endorsed reporting guidelines
- Multi-lingual instructions on reporting checklist use

HEADACHE'S POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

- 80% of editorial board (n=15) use completed checklist to inform their decision
 - *“I check because it is a strong predictor of quality”*
- 53% felt reviewers used the checklist
- 93% felt the quality of methodological reporting had improved since policy implementation
- Only 46% had used a checklist outside of submitting to *Headache*
- Comments:
 - Authors may understand concepts but not the purpose of checklist
 - “afterthought” – not considered during article composition

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

| Barrier | Potential Solution |
|---|---|
| Lack of awareness of problem – no enthusiasm to take problem seriously | Gather evidence; circulate studies on positive effects of reporting guidelines; highlight transparency issues |
| Burdensome task for authors | Reinforce benefits (via instructions and editorials) for authors |
| Fear of being first in smaller fields | Do advantages of policy implementation outweigh risks – evident improvement in reporting quality may encourage submissions; collaborate with other titles |
| Thought-leaders in field believe <i>they</i> suitably address reporting issues and problem is overblown | Present evidence of scale of problem, undertake analysis of random sample of manuscripts |
| Mandatory enforcement perceived as excessive – consultation is a softer approach | Outline how checklist can be used during manuscript composition and by reviewers during evaluation |

CONFOUNDERS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

| Confounder | Potential Solution |
|---|---|
| Authors have no prior experience of reporting guidelines – acute problem for small, lower ranked journals | Provide educational resources; work with next generation of authors; ensure editorial staff can address questions |
| Large number of authors with no prior record of submission to journal – confused by policy | Provide clear instructions (both in the Instructions for Authors and submission system); provide training resources for authors |
| Language barriers | Translated guidelines help; journals may need to provide translated instructions |
| Incomplete checklists | If resources exist, consider strong enforcement, especially at revision submission. |
| Incorrect reporting guideline use | Ensure consistent enforcement – ask authors to supply correct checklist |
| No application of reporting criteria to manuscript | Enforcement; explain reporting standards policy is not about completing checklist |

AUTHORS THAT FAIL TO ADHERE

- 12% of submissions failed to include checklist
- 62% of submitting authors of manuscripts without reporting checklist were first time authors
 - Typically 47% of authors have no prior submission history with *Headache*
- 81% of papers without checklists are from non-English speaking countries
- 78% of papers without checklists were rejected after peer review

9 STEPS TOWARDS LAUNCHING A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING REPORTING STANDARDS

- **Step 1** – Identify the needs of your journal
- **Step 2** – Select “champions” to support implementation of reporting checklists
- **Step 3** – Identify appropriate checklists
- **Step 4** – Determine enforcement level (mandatory compliance or simply recommend guidelines are consulted)
- **Step 5** – Phased or full launch
- **Step 6** – Write up proposal on implementing improved reporting standards
- **Step 7** – Preparations for launch
- **Step 8** – Launch activities
- **Step 9** – Evaluation and audit

STEP 1 - IDENTIFY THE NEEDS OF YOUR JOURNAL

- **Assess scale/nature of reporting *problem***
 - Within your journal
 - Within your field or sub-specialty
- **Analyze any steps towards improved reporting standards other journals in your field have adopted**
- **Consult authors to determine potential reactions**
 - Broad range of authors based on experience/location
 - Determine pre-existing comprehension of reporting issues
 - Establish how authors could/should embrace reporting standards during manuscript composition
- **Outline the benefits of improving reporting standards**
- **Define measurable policy objectives**

STEP 2 – SELECT “CHAMPIONS” TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF REPORTING CHECKLISTS

Champions (or facilitators) are needed:

- **Vocally, intellectually and even politically support a reporting policy and its adoption process**
 - Help develop policy rationale
 - Convince colleagues of the need for improved reporting standards
 - Support the editorial office if criticisms emerge
- **Need administrative champions**
 - Editorial office staff
 - Publisher

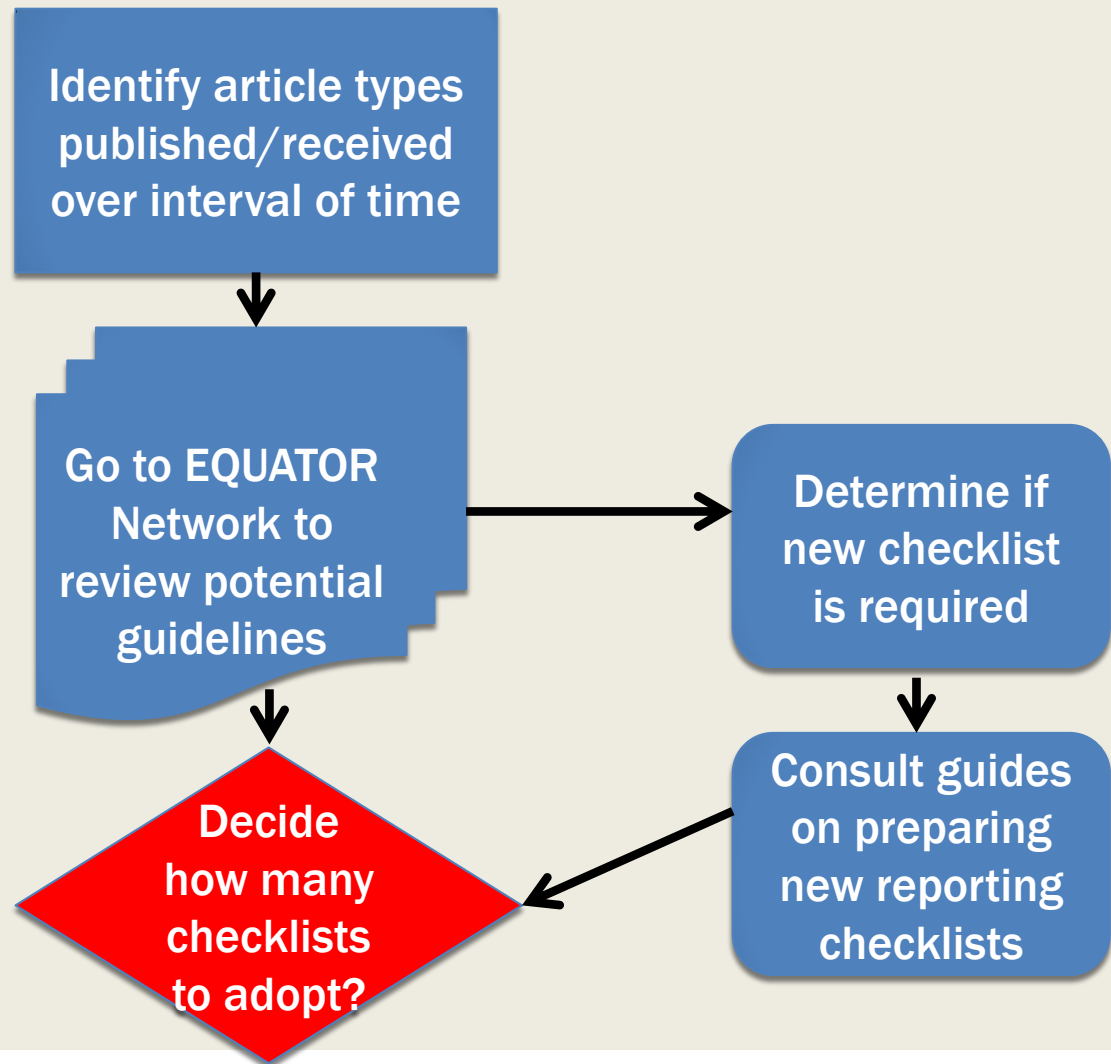
STEP 3 – IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE CHECKLIST

Consider extent of reporting policy

Adopt multiple guidelines?
Consider just CONSORT for RCTs?

- 63% of CONSORT endorsers also endorsed other guidelines (*Headache* internal study, 2010)
 - Most common adoptions alongside CONSORT:
 - STARD (diagnostic accuracy)
 - STROBE (observational studies in epidemiology)
 - MOOSE (for meta-analyses of observation studies in epidemiology)

STEP 3 – IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE GUIDELINES



STEP 4 – LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

- **Mandatory Use or Recommend Consultation of Guidelines**
 - How will compliance be monitored?
 - Must authors complete a reporting guideline checklist to demonstrate compliance?
 - Do your authors have a track record of complying with your directions?
 - What are the reporting cultures at other journals within the field?
- Will editorial office workflows be impacted?

STEP 5 – PHASED OR COMPLETE LAUNCH OF REPORTING POLICY

Phased Launch

Initial launch with one guideline (either recommended consultation or mandatorily enforced). Other guidelines added later if needed

Initial launch involves recommendation to consult guidelines



Subsequent move to mandatory enforcement

Complete Launch

Provide full suite of reporting guidelines

Outline expectations to authors

Must demonstrate compliance in article

STEP 6 – WRITE UP PROPOSAL FOR IMPLEMENTING POLICY

- **Draft policy outline to include:**
 - Goals
 - Expectations
 - Degrees of enforcement
 - Approach to monitoring compliance
 - Implementation plan
- **Get approval or endorsement from publication committee/board of directors/publisher. Approval offers:**
 - Support if the need for stated standards is challenged
 - Powerful backing if the policy is undermined by authors through non-compliance

STEP 7 – PREPARATIONS FOR LAUNCH

- Prepare editorial to outline policy rationale to authors, reviewers and readers
- Schedule publication/posting of new Instructions for Authors upon launch of policy
 - Also develop Instructions for Reviewers
- Ensure editorial team (editors, staff) are properly trained to assess checklists/determine manuscripts meet reporting standards
- Consider development of online training courses and presentations to be delivered at scientific meetings

STEP 8 - LAUNCH

- Publish launch editorial and new instructions
- Consider email marketing/publicity campaign to previous authors – stress benefits
- Publish a follow up editorial documenting success of policy, continued need for observation
 - Loder EW, Penzien DB. *Improving the Quality of Research Reporting: Headache Steps Up to the Plate* (Headache, 2009)
 - Roberts JL. Reporting Policies and Headache. (Headache 2010)
- Additional publicity mechanisms:
 - Member newsletters
 - Publish quotes from thought-leaders in support of policy
 - Social media

STEP 9 – EVALUATION AND AUDIT

Set measurable objectives ahead of implementation:

- Plan for a pre-post analysis of criteria adherence (mandatory) or voluntary adoption (recommended) following policy launch
- Adherence to criteria upon *initial* submission for peer review
- Establish awareness amongst authors of the issues driving a reporting policy
- Measure subsequent adoption of reporting guidelines by other journals in the field
- Track the fate of papers that fail to adhere to reporting guideline policies

CONCLUSIONS

- Research your journal's need and the potential author reaction to the imposition of a policy
- Ensure staff/editors can handle additional responsibilities
- Determine level of enforcement
- Decide upon phased or complete launch
- Devise coherent policy
- Secure support for policy
- Promote policy through published articles, instruction/educational courses and marketing

- Always stress the rewards of extra effort
- Be patient and supportive with authors unfamiliar with reporting guidelines