TOWARDS THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF REPORTING GUIDELINES AT BIOMEDICAL JOURNALS
Review 8 essential steps to ensure successful launch

- Each step is universal
  - Submission system agnostic (ScholarOne, Editorial Manager, EJP)
  - Journals can be society owned, publisher owned or independent entities
  - Commission only or willing to receive unsolicited submissions
  - Sensitive to different models of peer review

- The implementation plan considers:
  - Practical matters behind implementation
  - Developing a theoretical policy rationale to suit your journal
  - Navigating politics
  - Identifying pain points
  - Promoting the policy
8 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 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
Outline benefits for improving reporting standards:

- **Journal benefits**
  - Raise quality, consequently boosting reader experience
    - Enables heightened scrutiny ahead of acceptance
    - Burnish papers by ensuring reporting standards are excellent
  - Enhance the reproducibility of results
  - Improved transparency

- **Author benefits**
  - Consistently good advice that improves their paper
  - Perhaps, enhanced prospects of a paper being read and cited?
Champions (or facilitators) are needed to vocally, intellectually and even politically support a reporting policy and its adoption process.

- Shore up support
- Convince colleagues of the need for improved reporting standards
- Support the editorial office if criticisms emerge

Champions can also help shape policy rationale.
Editorial Champions

- Editors-in-Chief should consult their editorial board for input on nature and scope of a reporting policy.
- Editorial boards can discuss methods of monitoring adherence.
- Editorial board support for a policy enhances prospects of both formal adoption and author compliance.
- Editorial board members could support educational outreach efforts to authors and reviewers.

- Other Editors – consider collaboration with other journal editors within a field of study.
Editorial Staff as Facilitators

- Editorial staff *must* be engaged to devise new, sustainable, workflows
- Devise adaptations to the submission process

- Do editorial staff have the information they need to handle queries?
- If a mandatory policy is enforced (requiring follow up with errant authors), can they handle the extra responsibilities?
Thought leaders as champions

- Help overcome potentially negative perceptions
  - Prominent individuals can lead the way by evidently displaying adherence to reporting standards in their own work

- External advocacy: educating and informing authors and reviewers

- Internal advocacy: convince skeptics, particularly vocal critics or power-brokers on Publication Committees or society Board of Directors

- Thought-leader champions needed during policy development and implementation phase. Adds validity and support
STEP 3 – IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE GUIDELINES

1. Identify article types published/received over interval of time
2. Go to EQUATOR Network to review potential guidelines
3. Decide how many checklists to adopt?
4. Determine if new checklist is required
5. Consult guides on preparing new reporting checklists
### Study Type

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Reporting Guideline</th>
<th>% of submissions</th>
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<td>Randomized Controlled Trial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualitative Research</td>
<td>COREQ</td>
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**STEP 4 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT**

**Mandatory completion of checklists**

Do authors complete an accompanying reporting checklist at submission?

1. Authors upload checklist with manuscript via submission system
2. Authors supply completed checklist after submission (e.g. fax copy, scan)
3. Completed checklist supplied with revision
STEP 4 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT – PROVIDING AUTHORS WITH WHAT THEY NEED

How are checklists provided to authors?

- As part of the submission process
- Via revision letters
- As part of the instructions for authors

- Is that too late?
- Will authors go back and update?
- Will this step irritate authors?
- Might regular authors get used to the process quickly?
- What proportion of authors are repeat submitters?

- Link to sites where reporting checklists can be downloaded
- Checklists embedded within online instructions for authors
- Checklists embedded in submission site
**Strong Recommendation Authors Consult Guidelines**

Simply *encourage* authors to include a checklist with submission.

Recommend authors become familiar with reporting guideline criteria and ensure their manuscript adheres to the criteria.

Recommend consultations of guidelines on initial submission. *Mandatory* adherence with the revised submission.
Strong Recommendation Authors Consult Guidelines

Provide links to checklists via Instructions for Authors. Include statement that consulting guidelines is encouraged:

“It is strongly recommended, where appropriate, that you ensure your manuscript conforms to a reporting guideline that best fits your type of manuscript. For example, a CONSORT statement should be completed and uploaded with your manuscript for a Randomized Controlled Trial. The International Society for Sexual Medicine (ISSM) Publication Reporting Guidelines detail the appropriate checklist to use per study type.”

Example from The Journal of Sexual Medicine Author Instructions
Phased launches may be politically expedient.

Success of phased launch is somewhat predicated on assumption that many authors will return to submit new work.
Complete Launch

- A declarative policy containing multiple checklists and mandatory enforcement states firmly to authors that minimum standards must be met for ALL manuscript types.

- Short, sharp shock: quickly ensures compliance?

- Anecdotal reports from editorial offices:
  - Authors frequently fail to read Instructions for Authors.
  - For smaller or lower ranked titles authors are often shopping papers around journals, rarely making changes to a paper – hard to get authors to comply to formatting and policy requests.

- Anecdotal evidence: “soft launches” have led to low take-up of reporting policy adherence.
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 from publication committee/board of directors/publisher

- Approval offers:
  - Support if the need for standards is challenged by influential figures within the field
  - 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
  - Outline reasons for launching a reporting standards policy
  - Present the evidence from previously published studies that shows benefits of consulting checklists
  - Explain what will be required of authors

- Schedule publication/posting of new Instructions for Authors upon launch of policy

- If applicable, provide guide for reviewers on the utilization of checklists supplied by authors

- Ensure system configurations are in place with policy launch
  - Develop template letters to respond to cases of non-compliance
STEP 8 - LAUNCH

- Publish editorial and new instructions
- Consider email marketing/publicity campaign to previous authors – stress benefits
- After suitable time interval, 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
Journals will be confronted by:

- Apathy
- Misinterpretation
- Entrenched Practices
- Concern

Editors:
- Asking too much?
- Overly complex submission and review process?

Authors:
- Accepted, but flawed, practices perpetuated
- Subject thought leaders believing their research results trump methods/reporting standards
- Unable to comprehend reporting guidelines
- Weak skills/no training to facilitate incorporating reporting criteria
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