CHAPTER 29

Establishing a Coherent Reporting Guidelines Policy in Health Journals

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Introduction

Some journals have endorsed CONSORT by simply suggesting in their Instructions for Authors that authors become familiar with the aims of that particular reporting guideline. Though this strategy is better than nothing and requires minimal effort on the part of a journal, it is more effective if journals adopt a coherent reporting standards policy.

However, journals have different needs and resources. Consequently, there is no standard application – each journal must determine what is appropriate for its circumstances and constituents. This chapter suggests the points that journals should consider in devising a reporting standards policy. It also considers the potential barriers to the successful implementation of such a policy.

The ideas presented in this chapter are drawn from our experience of launching a reporting guideline adherence policy at a mid-sized, international, medical journal: *Headache: the Journal of Head and Face Pain*.

Eight steps toward implementing a reporting standards policy

Step 1 – Identifying the needs of your journal

For a policy to be effective, it is critical that a journal first defines the scope of the problem and demonstrates how reporting guidelines can help resolve

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issues of poor reporting standards. Measurable goals should also be set that can communicate the benefits of enforcing standards.

It is helpful to start by reviewing recent publications on reporting quality and adherence to guidelines such as CONSORT, PRISMA, and STROBE. The purpose of this review is to assess adherence and also to determine what reporting criteria are routinely missed. Such evidence should help the journal promote the benefits of adhering to reporting guidelines. Journals that are strict on adherence might even suggest that authors can improve their chances of publication by following the reporting guidelines.

Journals should also evaluate what other journals in their field are doing. If there has been little to no adoption of reporting guidelines, a journal will likely have to educate authors and reviewers about what the reporting guidelines are and how they should be used.

We also recommended consulting authors, reviewers, and members of the editorial board (if they are involved in decision making). Such discussion will enable a journal to shape its educational efforts better and become aware of the potential reactions to the proposed reporting standards policy.

Step 2 – Select "champions" to support and promote improving reporting standards

Working toward the launch of a reporting standards policy is generally time consuming and may be slow moving if approval from boards of directors, publishers, editorial boards, or publication committees is required. We recommend appointing a group of facilitators, or "champions," drawn from the editors, editorial office staff, and prominent thought-leaders within the field. Each group of champions would be expected to support the reporting policy and its passage through the approval process.

Editor facilitators

Editors involved with editorial decision making should be consulted at an early stage. In addition to critical input on the nature and scope of a reporting policy, the editorial board can discuss the methods for monitoring adherence to guidelines, such as incorporating a submitted reporting guideline checklist into a manuscript evaluation or using a cross-checking mechanism to ensure that a manuscript satisfies the intent of a reporting guideline.

Editorial staff

Staff can play a pivotal facilitator role. If a journal requires authors to upload a reporting guideline checklist, office staff will have to formulate a method for collecting completed checklists. This may involve online submission system reconfigurations where appropriate. Time and cost considerations, consequently, may become a factor. Editorial staff will also need to assess the effect this may have on their workload. If a mandatory policy is enforced, chasing errant authors will inevitably be required. Failure to consult with staff has the potential to lead to ill-conceived methods of enforcement that can tax workloads or lead to inconsistent application of standards as well as create scenarios that may frustrate submitting authors.

Thought leaders

Although evidence on the positive effects of reporting guidelines exists, authors likely will not be aware of this and quite possibly view the need to conform with reporting criteria (and perhaps complete a reporting checklist) as an unwelcome barrier to submission. To overcome this potentially negative perception, journals should consider involving high-profile individuals within a field to advocate the use of reporting guidelines. If thought-leaders and experienced writers recognize the need to consult reporting guidelines, then this could convince other authors of their need to do the same. Advocacy is not always "external" (i.e., educating and informing authors and reviewers) but also may be internal, convincing skeptics within a publishing house or society that positive outcomes are obtainable and that authors will not be driven away by demanding higher standards. The appointment of vocal champions, therefore, needs to take place not only after the implementation of a policy but also early in the policy development phase if an approval process needs to be completed.

Step 3 – Identifying appropriate checklists

As the goals for a reporting guideline policy are set, journals must then consider the extent of the policy. For example, will there only be a requirement for randomized controlled trials to adhere to CONSORT? Will there be additional guideline stipulations for diagnostic accuracy studies or systematic review articles? Should subject-specific adaptations of existing guidelines be considered? For example, *Headache* created an unofficial nonpharmacological, migraine-specific, adaptation of CONSORT. Editors must, therefore, select guidelines appropriate to the varieties of manuscripts submitted to their particular journal.

The EQUATOR Network website (www.equator-network.org) may be helpful in this task (see Chapter 6).

A study undertaken by the *Headache* editorial office in 2010 revealed that 63% of CONSORT-endorsing journals used more than one guideline-derived checklist. The other most commonly used guidelines were STARD (diagnostic accuracy), STROBE (observational studies in epidemiology), and MOOSE (for meta-analyses of observational studies in epidemiology). We recommend that journals take advantage of the variety of guidelines on offer and develop a policy that incorporates guidelines that fit the range of manuscript types submitted. Sometimes, this may even lead to the creation of a unique set of guidelines. At *Headache*, for example, a specific checklist for case reports was created.

Step 4 – Level of enforcement: mandatory use or recommended consultation of guidelines

With the intent and scope of a policy in place, journals must next consider the degree of enforcement. Requiring authors to complete a checklist compels them to redress omissions by forcing them to record the location of specific reporting criteria in their manuscript [1]. Checklists also enable editors and/or reviewers to quickly, and consistently, determine that at least the minimum reporting standards are met.

However, we appreciate that mandatory use of reporting guidelines is not an approach that will work for all journals. Staff time must be considered, as mandatory inclusion of a reporting guideline checklist may involve reconfiguring workflows, will require additional checking mechanisms, and potentially add delays to the peer review process if not properly thought out. Indeed, there are merits to the "recommendation approach" (i.e., "authors are strongly recommended …"). Most obviously, such an approach eliminates the possibility of author irritation. Table 29.1 includes a selection of questions to consider when determining which approach may best fit a journal.

Step 5 – Phased or complete launch of reporting policy

Journals may simply decide to construct a policy, flag its impending launch, and then implement it at a set date. However, as most journal editorial offices will attest, authors frequently demonstrate a lack of awareness of a particular publication's "author instructions." Consequently, imposition of a mandatory policy may cause disorientation for some authors. Editorial offices, therefore, need to be suitably prepared to assist.

Alternatively, journals may consider a phased approach. This potentially involves one of the following two strategies:

1. initial introduction of a single guideline, or
2. a phased launch with a simple *recommendation* to consult guidelines with the intent to move eventually toward a *mandatory* inclusion of a checklist with a submission. A phased approach allows authors to become familiar with new expectations, although this does assume that a journal regularly receives submissions from the same authors.

Step 6 – Reporting standards policy approval

Promoting good reporting may seem like a straightforward decision for a journal. Unfortunately, especially for smaller journals in a competitive publishing market, there may be perceived risks in adopting a reporting strategy. Such perceived threats are predicated on author intransigence to

Table 29.1 Issues to consider in developing a mandatory or consultative approach to using reporting guidelines.

Mandatory

- Do the authors return a reporting checklist? If yes,
  - Do authors upload the checklist with manuscript?
  - Do authors return the completed checklist after manuscript submission?
- How are checklists to be provided to authors?
  - As part of the submission process (via the online submission system)
  - As part of the Instructions for Authors
  - As a link to sites where reporting checklists can be downloaded
  - Embedded within the online Instructions for Authors
- What are the administrative workflows for collecting forms?
- Are reconfigurations to the online submission system required?
- How is noncompliance policed (no checklist, wrong checklist, erroneously completed checklist)?
  - Refuse to review the manuscript until the documentation is supplied?
  - Ask for the submission of checklists with the submission of revision?
  - Do nothing?
- Who polices noncompliance?
  - Editorial office staff
  - Editor-in-chief
  - Associate editors/editorial board (if applicable)
  - Reviewers
- How much effort will be required to chase noncompliant authors?
- Are completed checklists to be made available to reviewers or just reviewed by the editorial team?

Strong recommendation for authors to consult guidelines

- Should the submission of a checklist with the manuscript be encouraged?
- Consider including notification of a policy recommending consultation of guidelines in the journal's Instructions for Authors
- Consider including links to sites where checklists can be downloaded
- Possibly include embedded versions of the checklists within the online Instructions for Authors?
- Consider if the journal will assess for compliance with reporting guidelines
  - If yes, how will you complete such an assessment?
  - Who will assess for compliance?

applying extra effort or from having to take steps that may divulge previously concealed methodological flaws. Journal owners or publishers may express concern about taking steps that could repel authors toward journals with less stringent requirements.

Consequently, we recommend that journals should seek the formal support of its sponsoring society (at the Board of Directors/Governors level) or publisher before launching a reporting policy. Such official endorsement not only protects the editor from becoming a lightning rod for criticism, perhaps for "going too far," but also reinforces the policy as the official commitment of all parties to improve standards, especially in the face of complaints that efforts to accommodate improved reporting standards are burdensome.

Table 29.2 outlines some potential barriers to the launch and operation of a reporting guideline policy. These issues should be addressed or resolved before ratifying a standards policy.

Step 7 – Preparation for launch

Regardless of the type of reporting policy adopted, some simple steps can be taken ahead of launch that will boost the chances of successful implementation.

Table 29.2 Potential barriers to launching a reporting standards policy.

Barrier	Potential solution
Lack of awareness of reporting problem – unwillingness or no enthusiasm to consider a solution or take the problem seriously	Present evidence; numerous studies on the effect of reporting guidelines are available and have been highlighted by EQUATOR. Also, draw attention to the ability of reporting guidelines to provide greater transparency
Perception that applying reporting standards will be burdensome to authors – fear that authors will defect to other titles	Ensure any steps authors have to take are straightforward and meaningful; continually reinforce the benefits of reporting guidelines
Societies, publishers, and some editorial board members may fear being the first in the field to take action	Journals must consider if the potential advantages of being the first to apply standards outweigh the risks of being the first – for example, if a visible improvement in the quality of the manuscripts is evident, perhaps even measurable by an improved citation score, then the journal reacting first to the problem may then benefit by receiving better quality submissions over competing titles. Repetition of the benefits of reporting guidelines may be required
Most decision makers at the journal or society level are experienced authors who, perhaps with some justification, believe *they* suitably address reporting issues; consequently, the problem is overblown – this issue is compounded if the most vocal supporters of inertia are unfamiliar with the scale of unpublished manuscripts that still undergo peer review but are eventually rejected	Present evidence of the scale of the problem; perhaps undertake an analysis of a random sample of manuscripts
For mandatory enforcement policies that compel the use of a reporting guideline checklist, the checklist is perceived as an administrative task – some editors, society, or publisher decision makers may perceive the adoption of a checklist as excessive and advocate an approach that simply favors consultation	Outline how a reporting checklist can be utilized in the composition of a paper and subsequent evaluation by reviewers and editors. Reporting guidelines also apply consistency in reporting

The first step is to write an editorial scheduled to be published just ahead of the policy launch. Such an editorial should:

- outline the reasons for launching a reporting standards policy, detail known reporting problems, and describe the new standards expected;
- document evidence that shows the benefits of consulting reporting guideline checklists;
- explain what will be required from authors and any extra steps required at manuscript submission.

At the same time, the Instructions for Authors should be updated to reflect the new policy. Online submission and review systems may also need reconfiguring to accommodate the collection of a reporting guideline checklist. This can be done in consultation with the publisher or directly with the software system provider.

Second, the editorial office must ensure that editorial board members and reviewers are suitably trained to assess reporting checklists and/or determine if a manuscript appropriately adheres to a reporting guideline. For editorial board members, this might involve discussion at a team meeting. For reviewers, the provision of a short explanatory document, perhaps attached to the correspondence dispatched following acceptance to review a manuscript, should be considered.

Finally, we recommend that the editorial team devise short training courses to be delivered at scientific meetings, or as online courses perhaps featuring a PowerPoint presentation and the associated instruction sheets. Such courses, if resources permit, may be expanded with podcasts from the editor on why a policy is being introduced or even feature webinars around topics such as “best practices in submitting a manuscript” or “improving your chances of publication.”

Step 8 – Launch

Unfortunately, unless a title is of significant size and visibility, many authors and reviewers will miss all the features mentioned in Step 7. It is critical, therefore, that a journal does not simply launch a policy and then wait passively for all parties to start adhering to new guidelines. As Table 29.3 outlines, for numerous reasons, most journals will experience a variety of challenges because of a combination of confusion, a lack of comprehension, and willful disregard, particularly if a title launches a mandatory adherence approach.

To ensure all the hard work in conceiving and preparing a policy is not undone, we recommend that journals continue with publicity efforts explaining the reporting policy. These might include writing: follow-up editorials, adding features in society newsletters, publishing positive author feedback and quotes from thought-leaders or including text in an annual “thank you” message to the recently submitting authors. Editorial

Table 29.3 Potential problems in the application of a reporting standards policy.

Barrier	Potential solution
Authors have no prior experience with reporting guidelines – uncertainty emerges leading to lots of questions or perhaps a decision by authors to submit elsewhere	Provide educational resources; ensure that editorial staff can address problems
Large number of authors with no prior record of submitting to a journal – unfamiliarity with journal guidelines leads to noncompliance; higher prevalence of authors simply "shopping around" their manuscript to any journal that will publish it	Provide clear instructions (both in the Instructions for Authors and within the online submission system); provide training resources and foster support where possible
Language barriers – authors cannot comprehend the reporting guidelines or submission instructions	Some guidelines are being translated into other languages; consider providing instructions in the languages of the most common author locations
Incomplete checklists – many forms require authors to specify on which page of the manuscript reporting criteria can be found, many leave blank when it is not appropriate to do so or answer "yes" or "no," which does not help an evaluation of reporting standards	If resources permit, journals should consider strong enforcement, especially if a new reporting standards policy is to have credibility. Otherwise, repeat authors will simply continue to perform the bare minimum or worse, just blatantly disregard the policy in future submissions
Authors complete the wrong checklist (either unintentionally or willfully) if they perceive that the checklist may mask deficiencies in their paper	Ensure consistent enforcement – request authors resupply the checklist, an approach that may best be conducted as part of a revision request, rather than at initial submission, only for the paper to quickly fail to progress through peer review
No application of reporting criteria to a manuscript, but checklist is carefully completed – experience has shown that some authors will fill out the reporting guideline checklist, but a cross-check against the manuscript finds no evidence of the presence of essential reporting criteria	Ensure consistent enforcement – request authors address the problem. Explain that the point of the reporting standards policy is not to complete a checklist, but to ensure that a manuscript suitably adopts higher standards of reporting
No application of reporting criteria to a manuscript, consultation is recommended, not mandated – if standards are not consistently or accurately evaluated; authors perceive they can make little or no effort toward applying higher standards and still get published	Continue to request reviewers and editors to be vigilant; remind authors of the benefits of reporting guidelines

Table 29.3 (*Continued*)

Barrier	Potential solution
Experienced authors believing that the rules do not apply to them	Ensure consistent enforcement no matter the seniority of the author; present evidence of inconsistent application of reporting standards; enlist the support of thought-leaders who can support a reporting standards policy
Inconsistent application of reporting standards by editors. Some manuscripts may be thoroughly vetted, others slip through peer review	Consistency is critical if reporting standards are to be taken seriously by authors. Ensure all editors are familiar with the reporting standards policy and that they agree to consistently applied standards. There should be consequences for ignoring or undermining a reporting standards policy, particularly if an editorial board or Associate Editors make recommendations regarding the suitability for publication

offices should consider reaching out to authors annually with a short training course at meetings.

Conclusion

The use of research reporting guidelines is becoming common, at least among the prestigious biomedical journals. The enforcement of standards at such journals is relatively straightforward, since authors are keen to publish under their imprimatur. However, for most other journals, challenges must be confronted. Most barriers to enforcing reporting guidelines can be mitigated with careful planning and clearly expressed intentions, supported by educational activities and continuous enforcement. To maintain the validity, or credibility, of the peer-reviewed scientific literature, it is critical that journals recognize they have the power to change the *status quo* and take the steps needed to ensure that reporting standards are followed. It is hoped that the steps described in this chapter will convince uncertain editors that the implementation of research reporting guidelines is not an insurmountable hurdle.

Reference

1 Hopewell, S., Altman, D.G., Moher, D. & Schulz, K.F. (2008) Endorsement of the CONSORT statement by high impact factor medical journals: a survey of journal editors and journal "Instructions to Authors." *Trials*, **9**, 20.