

Author's response to reviews

Title: Simple decision tree tool to facilitate author identification of reporting guidelines during submission: a before-after study

Authors:

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Author's response to reviews:

Dear Joerg,

Thank you for reviewing our manuscript and for the very constructive comments from the reviewers. We have revised our article as requested, and provided a point-by-point response below. Thank you.

Kind regards,

Daniel Shanahan, Ines Lopes de Sousa and Diana Marshall

Reviewer #1: The aim of the presented study was to investigate the impact of online decision tree on authors' ability to identify appropriate reporting guideline for their manuscript during the submission process.

Although many reporting guidelines exist together with a consensus opinion that they are helpful tools for authors their use is still not routine and awareness of their existence is still patchy. This combined with difficulties many researchers have in clearly identifying the general 'study type' (e.g. RCT, cohort study, etc.) for their particular research study limits the use and potential

benefit of reporting guidelines. It is quite difficult to conduct meaningful research exploring barriers and facilitators of reporting guidelines uptake or implementing effective interventions to increase their efficient use. This study is therefore informative and adds the evidence where it is needed.

I would like to commend the authors for high standard of their manuscript. It is only very rarely that I review a manuscript that is succinct yet clear and informative.

Dear Iveta,

Thank you for reviewing our article and for your kind and helpful comments. On reviewing the figures in both the text and the tables, as you highlighted, we noticed a discrepancy whereby some of the articles had been misclassified. We have corrected this error and update the data throughout. It had no impact on the interpretation and conclusions of the article. We have also tried to address all your other comments below. Thank you.

Kind regards,

Daniel

My only comments / suggestions for authors to consider include the following:

Abstract:

1. 8 - suggest splitting into 2 sentences ...had ('before'). After 6 weeks ...

- Thanks, I've made this change.

l.34: I do not believe your end statement "majority of authors failed to correctly identify ... that non were relevant" is supported by your data: looking at your results in the table 2 where you state that from 301 'before' manuscripts 225 had applicable reporting guideline - this means that 76 did not. Line 30 in the table states that 72 manuscripts/authors correctly stated that no RG is relevant. To me this reads that actually majority of authors stated this fact correctly.

I am not disputing the first part of your concluding statement that majority of authors still failed to correctly identify the relevant guidelines.

- On your advice and that of reviewer 2, I have recalculated the percentages using the number of manuscripts with/without relevant reporting guidelines, as appropriate. This helps to highlight that the percentages are comparable and I have removed this sentence and edited the remainder of the article accordingly.

Introduction:

L. 41-43:

Suggest taking out 'consensus' - not all 300 RG on the EQUATOR website are based on consensus Suggest deleting the last part of your sentence "including many reporting guidelines ..." - slightly confusing

- Changed.

Methods

Intervention, l. 33: suggest rewording the sentence (perhaps: This automated decision tree asks authors to provide yes-no answers regarding their study to identify the study type and to suggest relevant reporting guideline.)

- Thank you for flagging this, I have changed the description of the tool as suggested.

Outcomes, l.1-3 (Study types with well-knownfrom the analysis) - I found this description slightly confusing.

- I have reworded this explanation to “Study protocols and economic evaluations, which are listed by the EQUATOR Network as “main study types” but whose reporting guidelines were not included in the decision tree were excluded from the analysis.”, so it is hopefully clearer now.

Results

L.41,42: There seems to be a tiny discrepancy in numbers for the 'before cohort: is it 300 or 301 (compare your text and both tables)

- When checking this, I identified a discrepancy in the analysis when some articles had been incorrectly classified, and have updated the figures accordingly. They should now be consistent across the article and in the tables.

Discussion

Not sure if the authors want to elaborate a bit on why they got the results they got - what might be the possible reasons (lack of people's knowledge in the general research methodology area, perhaps not so clear wording in the online tool, too late stage for people to consider this responsibly???)

- I've expanded a bit on the possible explanations for what was observed in the discussion. As it is all hypothesising, I don't want to be too accusatory here, although agree that submission is likely too late in the process to have a great impact.

Overall I believe this is a useful paper and I support its publication. Thank you for the opportunity to review it; it was a pleasure to read.

Reviewer #2: Reporting guidelines are developed to improve the reliability and value of published health research literature by promoting transparent and accurate reporting. Different study designs require appropriate guidelines. Several reporting guidelines for different study designs have been developed and are provided by the EQUATOR network. Several journals already endorse the use of reporting guidelines, but reporting still is improvable. More than 350 reporting guidelines are available so that it could be challenging to find the relevant guideline. The authors of this study investigated, if a decision tree tool (based on the flow chart created by

Equator) provided during the submission process, could help authors to find the most appropriate checklist and reporting guideline.

This is an interesting study that not only describes the present situation; the authors aim to further improve reporting of manuscripts by drawing the author's attention to the decision tree tool. The manuscript is a novel study; to my knowledge there is little work in this area. The methodology used to answer this question is adequate. The research addressed a specific question that had been answered in the study. The paper is well-conducted but the reporting of some text passages need to be clarified:

Dear Anette,

Thank you for taking the time to review our article and for your helpful comments. In particular, thank you for your suggestion of changing the denominator and layout of Table 2 – this has helped make the presentation clearer, and also helped us to identify an error in the classification of some articles. We have corrected this error and update the data throughout. It had no impact on the interpretation and conclusions of the article. We have also tried to address all your other comments below. Thank you.

Kind regards,

Daniel

Abstract (page 1) and page 3:

Line 7-11: Something seems to be wrong with the following sentence:

"During the submission process authors were prompted to follow the relevant reporting guideline from the EQUATOR Network and asked to confirm that they had ('before'), after 6 weeks this prompt was updated to include a direct link to the decision tree tool and an additional prompt for those authors who stated that 'no guidelines were applicable' ('after')."

Proposed change:

"During the submission process authors were prompted to follow the relevant reporting guideline from the EQUATOR Network and asked to confirm that they have followed the guideline ('before'). After 6 weeks this prompt was updated to include a direct link to the decision tree tool and an additional prompt for those authors to who stated that 'no guidelines were applicable' ('after')."

- Thank you for highlighting this – I have edited the sentence.

Line 19 (Abstract), page 6 - line 51/52 (results) and page 13, line 17 (table 1): There is a discrepancy between text and table: Abstract / results: 35% and 37%; Table 1: 35% and 36%.

- On checking the data, I identified an error that had let to a few articles being misclassified. I have therefore rechecked all the data, corrected any mistakes that appeared in the article or tables, and updated the data on figshare.

Introduction:

Page 4:

Line 12: The CONSORT Statement ('statement' always capitalized!) is an "evidence-based, minimum set of recommendations for reporting randomized controlled trials" and not for "any report of a clinical trial" as stated in this manuscript. This should be corrected.

- This has been corrected and updated wherever I mention “the CONSORT Statement”

Line 12: I would recommend citing here also the current version of the CONSORT Statement: Moher, D., et al. (2010). "CONSORT 2010 explanation and elaboration: updated guidelines for reporting parallel group randomised trials." *BMJ* 340: c869.

- I have added a reference to CONSORT 2010 here.

Line 15: Since its publication, the CONSORT Statement, ... Line 25 (and / or line 4): On this topic the following article has been published very recently which you might wish to cite: Dechartres, A., et al. (2017). "Evolution of poor reporting and inadequate methods over time in 20 920 randomised controlled trials included in Cochrane reviews: research on research study." *BMJ* 357: j2490.

- Thank you for flagging this very interesting article – I have added it as a reference to the sentence “[...] recent reviews have demonstrated that reporting of essential information continues to be generally inadequate in trial reports across all areas of medicine.”

Line 53/54: For clarification I would recommend to add 2-3 sentences and to describe the "simple decision-tree tool" you used more precisely (already in this section). You should report that you used the online wizard developed by the Equator Network and Penelope Research in this study.

- I have added a bit more explanation of the tool and identified it as the Penelope EQUATOR Wizard here, as well as in the Methods.

Methods section:

Page 5:

Line 6: I recommend "Study cohort" instead of "Study population"

- I have made the change.

Line 7/8: It is not very transparently described when the study took place and over what period. The exact dates should be given, i.e. when the study started, the time period of the "before" study, the date, when the submission-websites and guidelines were updated and the time period of the "after" study. The period of the entire study is reported in the abstract but is missing in the methods section.

- Thank you for flagging this – we have added the dates the first question was introduced, when it was updated to the second question and when it was removed.

Line 18-27 and page 13, table 2, is a bit confusing: I would recommend to present- after the "No. of submitted manuscripts" and the "No. with applicable reporting guidelines" - the "No. without applicable reporting guideline", so that you got the 100% (n=301 / 290). For both (with and without applicable reporting guideline) you should show the number of correct and incorrect statements. The percentages in parentheses should refer to "the number with applicable reporting guidelines" and "without applicable reporting guidelines", respectively, instead of the total number of submitted manuscripts (301 / 290).

- Thank you for this suggestion – reordering it as you have suggested helped me to identify that a few articles had been misclassified, and I have now corrected this. Table 2 has been laid out as you have suggested and is hopefully clearer now.

Results:

Page 6:

Line 51/52: There is a discrepancy between text and table: Abstract and line 51: 37%; Table 1: 36% (see above).

- All data in the tables and text have been rechecked and corrected.

Page 7:

Line 1: "... number of authors identifying the incorrect reporting guideline ..." is confusing. Instead I suggest to write "... number of authors choosing a reporting guideline that is not applicable ..."

- This has been changed.

Line 4: "... was also associated with a reduction in the number of authors correctly stating that there were no relevant reporting guidelines for their study (24% vs 21%; $p=0.35$) ..." Because this result is not statistically significant, I would not describe this difference as a reduction.

- This paragraph has been reworded.

Discussion

There are some redundancies in the Introduction (line 30-31 and 46-49) and the Discussion (line 18-21 and 38-41): One of the two should be deleted.

- Thank you for highlighting this. I have removed the text regarding issues endorsing multiple reporting guidelines from the discussion; however, feel that it is necessary to mention the impact of endorsement on reporting in both the introduction and discussion to clarify the purpose of the study, so have left the duplication of the Turner et al paper in to emphasise the point.