STEPS TOWARDS LAUNCHING A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING REPORTING STANDARDS IN SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS
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

Reporting Guidelines and Requesting Protocols
7 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** – Determine enforcement level (mandatory compliance or simply recommend guidelines are consulted)
- **Step 4** – Phased or full launch
- **Step 5** – Write up proposal on implementing improved reporting standards
- **Step 6** – Preparations for launch
- **Step 7** – Launch activities
Despite many highly-cited papers on poor reporting standards, awareness of the issues and the implications for poor standards remains low.

“...the quality of reporting remains well below an acceptable level.”

STEP 1 – IDENTIFY THE NEEDS OF YOUR JOURNAL

Journals will be confronted by:

- **Apathy**
  - Editors
  - Authors

- **Concern**
  - Asking too much? Overly complex submission and review process? Is it worth the effort?

- **Entrenched Practices**
  - Accepted, but flawed, practices perpetuated
  - Subject thought leaders believing their research results trump methods/reporting standards

- **Misinterpretation**
  - Unable to comprehend reporting guidelines
  - Weak skills/no training to facilitate incorporating reporting criteria
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 select authors to determine potential reactions
  - 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?
Unless editorial fiat can ensure quick adoption, the implementation process will be slow
- Several potential layers of politics/approval

Identify implementation leaders
- Editor or members of the editorial board
- Editorial office staff member

Determine who will administer implementation
- Who will check for compliance?
- Does the editorial office have the skills to determine submission system capabilities? Can they make configuration changes?
- Can your publisher play an active role in adapting workflows/systems to support the policy (if needed)
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.

**STEP 2 – SELECT “CHAMPIONS” TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF REPORTING CHECKLISTS**
Editorial and Thought Leader 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
  - Incorporating a submitted reporting guideline checklist into manuscript evaluation
  - Devising a sustainable, uniform, checking mechanism to ensure a manuscript has conformed to a reporting guideline
- Support for a policy enhances prospects of both formal adoption and author compliance
- Help overcome potentially negative perceptions
  - Prominent individuals can lead the way by evidently displaying adherence to reporting standards in their own work
**STEP 3 – 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?
- Will editorial office workflows be impacted?
- Will submission systems need to be configured?
- Phased introduction with *Recommended Consultation* moving to *Mandatory Use*?
- Do your authors have a track record of complying with your directions?
- What are the reporting cultures at other journals within the field?
Mandatory completion of checklists

Refuse to review *initial* submission until checklist supplied or manuscript is made compliant

Ask for checklist/evidence of compliance with *revised* submission

Do nothing
How are checklists provided to authors?

- As part of the submission process

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
STEP 3 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

**Strong Recommendation Authors Consult Guidelines**

- Will your journal assess for guideline compliance if no checklist is required?
- Are your authors self-motivated enough to willingly ensure their manuscript meets reporting standards?
- Who will assess for compliance?
- Will the compliance assessor have to work from the guideline checklists?
STEP 3 – LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

Third option:
- Authors submit their protocol for peer review
- Journal peer reviews the protocol
- Journal then offers various levels of support following protocol peer review:
  - Guarantee to fully peer review final paper when written
  - Guarantee to publish final paper as long as authors have stuck to the protocol

Fourth Option:
- Provide support to authors when a journal commissions a systematic review
- E.g. the journal Headache provides the services of its Design and Methods Advisor for free
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

- 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
  - Consider building checklists into the submission process

- Anecdotal evidence: “soft launches” have led to low take-up of reporting policy adherence
STEP 5 – 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 6 – 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 7 - 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
- Additional publicity mechanisms:
  - Member newsletters
  - Publish quotes from thought-leaders in support of policy
  - Social media
28 rehabilitation journals got together to decide to launch a collective reporting guidelines policy

- Multiple reporting guidelines
- Joint statement on the current levels of poor reporting
- Informed readerships the journals would expect better and would monitor for evidence of standards
- The journals were free to choose their level of enforcement
- A joint editorial was written and published simultaneously
- Since publication, several more rehabilitation journals signed up
CASE STUDY: REHABILITATION JOURNALS


- “To ensure the quality of the disability and rehabilitation research that is published, the 28 rehabilitation journals simultaneously publishing this editorial have agreed to take a more aggressive stance on the use of reporting guidelines.* Research reports must contain sufficient information to allow readers to understand how a study was designed and conducted, including variable definitions, instruments and other measures, and analytical techniques.”
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