

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

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# 7 STEPS TOWARDS LAUNCHING A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING REPORTING STANDARDS

- 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

# STEP 1 – IDENTIFY THE NEEDS OF YOUR JOURNAL

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.”*

Hopewell S, Dutton S, Yu LM, Chan AW, Altman DG. The quality of reports of randomised trials in 2000 and 2006: comparative study of articles indexed in PubMed. [BMJ](#). 2010 Mar 23;340:c723

# 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

Misinterpretatio  
n

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

# STEP 1 – IDENTIFY THE NEEDS OF YOUR JOURNAL

## 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?

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

- 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)



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

**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?

# STEP 3 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

## Mandatory completion of checklists

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

Ask for  
checklist/evid  
ence of  
compliance  
with *revised*  
submission

Do  
nothing

# STEP 3 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

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

# STEP 3 - LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT

## Strong Recommendation Authors Consult Guidelines

Simply *encourage* authors to include a checklist with submission

and

*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

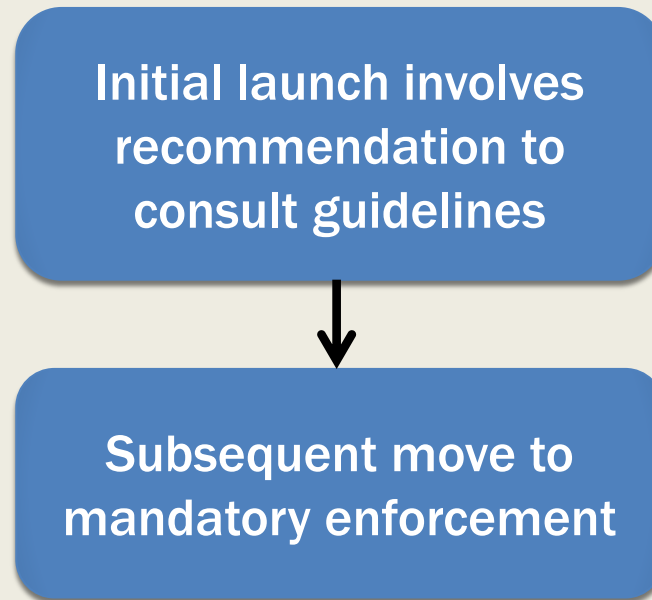
## ■ Fourth Option:

- 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



# STEP 4 – PHASED OR COMPLETE LAUNCH OF REPORTING POLICY

## Phased Launch



- Phased launches may be politically expedient
- Success of phased launch is somewhat predicated on assumption that many authors will return to submit new work

# STEP 4 – PHASED OR COMPLETE LAUNCH OF REPORTING POLICY

## 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

# CASE STUDY: REHABILITATION JOURNALS

- 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

- Chan L, Heinemann AW, Roberts JL. Elevating the quality of disability and rehabilitation research: Mandatory use of the reporting guidelines. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*. [March 2014](#). Volume 95, Issue 3, Pages 415-417
- “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