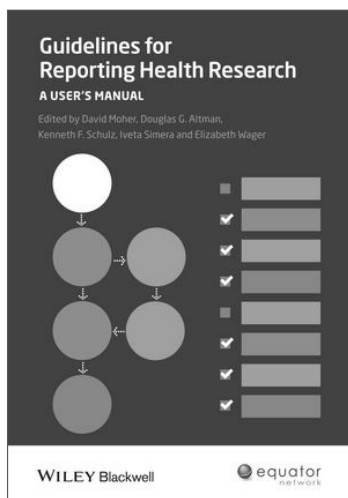


Guidelines for Reporting Health Research: A User's Manual

Moher D, Altman DG, Schulz KF, Simera I, Wager E, eds. John Wiley & Sons. 2014, 344 pages



Guidelines for Reporting Health Research: A User's Manual is a practical guide written by the authors of the health research reporting guidelines in association with the EQUATOR Network to help investigators in the selection and application of the appropriate standards for reporting their research because “articles should include all the information about methods and results that is essential to judge the validity and relevance of a study and, if desired, use its findings”. According to Drummond Rennie, in his foreword, “given the ignorance, ineptitude, inattention, and bias of so many investigators, reviewers, and journal editors”, biased and inadequate reporting is “a widespread endemic disease”.

The inadequate reporting of research has been known about for decades. Fifty-one years ago, Stanley Schor, a biostatistician, and Irving Karten, a medical student, reported the results of their experiment in *JAMA*. They described how a statistical review of 514 papers submitted to a journal increased the proportion of manuscripts accepted from 26% to 74%. On the basis of their findings, Karten and Schor recommended the inclusion of a statistician in the investigators' and editors' teams.

The manual comprises 29 short and easy-to-read chapters that are divided into four parts. Each of the chapters can be read as a standalone chapter. Part I of the book covers general issues, from the importance of transparent reporting of health research to the EQUATOR Network. The chapter entitled Ambiguities and Confusions Between Reporting and Conduct is a useful reminder that guidelines are solely for “describing what was done and what was found” and therefore reporting standards should not be used as a means to assess the quality of a study because a study can be done well but reported poorly or done badly but reported well. How to Develop a Reporting Guideline is another useful chapter in part I. It provides insight into and appreciation of the stages in the development of the reporting guidelines.

Part II has 18 chapters about some of the guidelines, including CONSORT for randomised controlled trials (which was first published in 1996 and was perhaps “the first systematically developed reporting guideline”), several of the CONSORT extensions, and SPIRIT (Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials). Part III has four chapters, including a particularly useful chapter for authors, journal editors, and reviewers: Statistical Analyses and Methods in the Published Literature: the SAMPL Guidelines. This chapter is about the reporting of basic statistical methods and results so as “to prevent most of the reporting deficiencies routinely found in scientific articles”. Part IV has just one chapter, which is about the steps in establishing a policy for reporting standards in health journals.

According to Douglas Altman and David Moher in Importance of Transparent Reporting of Health Research (chapter 1), peer review and other quality checks are not adequately effective in the prevention of poor-quality reporting. They go on to discuss how to achieve transparent reporting. Papers with poor reporting of methods and ambiguous or selective reporting of the findings are a waste of resources or they can be harmful. Importantly, well developed reporting guidelines can help in the production of high-quality research publications. Additionally, prospective registration of clinical trials and access to protocols help to safeguard against the potential for “fictitiously” reporting the items required as per the guidelines.

In theory, the reporting of research findings ought not to be a problem because plenty of reporting guidelines are available on the EQUATOR Network, which was launched in June, 2008. So far, the EQUATOR Network has 358 reporting guidelines for the various study designs—eg, CONSORT and its extensions, STROBE for observational studies in epidemiology, and STRICTA for clinical trials of acupuncture. Another 42 reporting guidelines are in development. The EQUATOR Network's “mission is to achieve accurate, complete, and transparent reporting of all health research studies to support research reproducibility and usefulness” and “minimise avoidable waste of financial and human investments in health research projects”. However, the abundance of freely available reporting standards for the improvement of the quality of research publications seems to be of little avail if they are not adhered to or applied properly. Hopefully, *Guidelines for Reporting Health Research: A User's Manual* will at least up the ante for the reader to become (better) acquainted with the minimum requirements for reporting research.

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