

Guidelines for the reporting of health research are underfunded

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Although reporting guidelines can improve the accuracy and reliability of research reports, there is little funding available for developing such guidelines, according to a new survey published in the open access journal *PLoS Medicine* this week.

The survey was conducted by the EQUATOR Network, a new initiative funded by the UK National Health Service. The initiative aims to coordinate the efforts of those developing good reporting guidelines across many areas of medical research, and to provide resources for training and for the promotion of guidelines. Its inaugural meeting will be held on the 26th of June at the Royal Society of Medicine, London.

The poor reporting of a medical study's methodology and findings can lead to ineffective treatments, the waste of valuable health care resources and harm to patients. Guidelines such as the CONSORT Statement – a checklist that was developed in 1996 to allow authors to transparently report how a clinical trial was designed, analyzed and interpreted – have led to important improvements in the reliability of published research and how it can translate into practice. But despite the fact that there are now similar reporting guidelines for other types of medical research, including diagnostic and epidemiological studies, their potential is not fully realized. They are not routinely used on a large scale and most journals do not actively promote them (an earlier study showed only 22% of journals included the CONSORT Statement in their guidelines for authors, despite the fact that the statement is widely accepted).

In the EQUATOR Network's first project, Dr. Iveta Simera (of the Centre for Statistics in Medicine, Oxford, United Kingdom) and colleagues from the UK, Canada and the United States, conducted a systematic search to find out how many guidelines there are with the broad objective of improving the reporting of health research. They surveyed the authors of the 37 guidelines that met the researchers' search criteria to establish the motivation behind the development of the guideline in question and to understand the major problems experienced with the guideline's development, update and impact.

Despite the fact that the motivation behind guidelines reflected concern about reporting standards in many fields of medical research, few authors had received dedicated funding for the development of guidelines. Lack of funding and time-constraints were identified as the two major problems: often the authors' institutions did not consider the development of reporting guidelines as academic research. The survey found that financial support is needed to help promote guidelines once they have been developed. It also showed a need to harmonize the development of these different guidelines (they must all have a robust methodology to be widely accepted).

"Poor reporting cannot be seen as an isolated problem that can be solved by targeting only one of the parties involved", concludes the survey. "A well-coordinated effort, with collaboration between the research and publishing communities, strongly supported by research funders, will likely have a better chance of leading to improved reporting of health research."

Citation: Simera I, Altman DG, Moher D, Schulz KF, Hoey J (2008) Guidelines for reporting health research: The EQUATOR Network's survey of guideline authors. PLoS Med 5(6): e139.

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