From the Editor: Reporting Guidelines for Research, Systematic Review, and Quality Improvement Articles

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More nursing journals are recommending authors follow specific reporting guidelines when preparing manuscripts for submission to the journal. These guidelines indicate how to report different types of research studies, systematic reviews, and quality improvement (QI) projects, among others, to ensure they include critical information and are of high quality. Authors disseminate the findings of their research through the literature: unclear and poor reporting can be misleading and prohibit readers from accurately evaluating the study methodology and findings. Readers need clear, complete, and transparent information in published articles, and the guidelines serve an important role in specifying the content to include.

**CONSORT: Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials**

The CONSORT guidelines were developed to improve the reporting of randomized controlled trials (RCTs). They include a checklist of essential items to include in the research report and a diagram for documenting the flow of participants through the trial (Schulz *et al.* 2010). Templates of the checklist and flow diagram are available to download, and there are other resources for authors at the CONSORT website at [http://www.consort-statement.org/home/](http://www.consort-statement.org/home/). Although the guidelines were intended for reporting RCTs, they are useful to authors when preparing manuscripts about other types of quantitative studies. Foster (2012) suggested that authors use the relevant items on the checklist as prompts for information to include in their research reports.

**PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses**

The PRISMA statement includes items that are essential for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. It is an update and expansion of the earlier QUOROM statement. Similar to CONSORT, PRISMA includes a checklist that identifies content to report and a diagram that shows the flow of information through the different phases of the review. With the diagram you can map out the number of records identified, included, and excluded in the review, with the reasons for the exclusions. Authors can download templates of the PRISMA checklist and flow diagram for use in conducting the systematic review and reporting the results. Although developed for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, PRISMA guidelines are valuable for reporting literature reviews. Prior to beginning the review, regardless of its type, authors should check the information that will be needed when reporting the results to ensure this information is retained during the review process. For example, you will need to report the databases searched, search strategy including any limits used,
number of records screened, number excluded, and so forth. The checklist and flow diagram are useful tools for conducting the reviews and recording information that will be needed eventually for a manuscript. The PRISMA statement and resources are available at [http://www.prisma-statement.org/](http://www.prisma-statement.org/).

**SQUIRE (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence)**

The SQUIRE guidelines are intended to help authors write usable papers about QI studies in health care. They ensure that the reports of a QI study are sufficiently comprehensive for readers to understand the problem, intervention, setting, and outcomes (Oermann 2009). Although developed for better reporting of QI, the SQUIRE guidelines can be used in planning a study that can eventually be published. There is a checklist of content to include in the paper that can be downloaded. Other resources to assist authors in reporting QI studies and projects are available at the SQUIRE website at [http://squire-statement.org/](http://squire-statement.org/).

**STROBE (Strengthening Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology)**

The STROBE guidelines are for conducting and reporting observational studies. The checklists of items in STROBE are recommended for disseminating the findings of cohort, case-control, and cross-sectional studies. They can be downloaded from [http://www.strobe-statement.org/index.php?id=strobe-home](http://www.strobe-statement.org/index.php?id=strobe-home).

**EQUATOR Network**

The EQUATOR Network ([http://www.equator-network.org/home/](http://www.equator-network.org/home/)) is an initiative to promote accurate and transparent reporting of health care research. The website includes an excellent library of resources for nurse authors, editors, and peer reviewers, including a comprehensive list of reporting guidelines organized by study type ([http://www.equator-network.org/resource-centre/library-of-health-research-reporting/](http://www.equator-network.org/resource-centre/library-of-health-research-reporting/)). While I reported four guidelines in this editorial, at the EQUATOR website there are many others listed to guide planning the study and then reporting the findings and outcomes. Links are provided to the guidelines for easy access by authors. There also is a resource center at the website with materials for authors, for editors such as links to developing a journal's policies on research reporting, and for peer reviewers. Courses and e-learning opportunities are also available.

**Why Bother with Reporting Guidelines?**

Reporting guidelines specify the elements needed when preparing manuscripts on different types of research studies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, QI projects, and others to ensure a clear and transparent report. They provide a framework for nurse authors to use when writing these manuscripts and a checklist for including essential information in them. Studies of the medical
literature suggest that journal endorsement of the CONSORT guidelines appears to improve the quality of the reporting of RCTs (Hopewell et al. 2012, Turner et al. 2012). In one of the few studies in nursing, Polit, Gillespie, and Griffin (2011) found that the use or mention of blinding (a strategy in RCTs to reduce bias from knowing who is receiving the intervention) correlated strongly to whether the journal endorsed CONSORT. The authors recommended that nurse authors reporting RCTs be more diligent in following those guidelines.

Nurse authors should be familiar with the various guidelines described in this editorial. Authors can use them when planning a study to be sure they have considered important elements and recorded information they will need later when preparing their manuscripts. If a journal endorses specific guidelines such as CONSORT for reporting a RCT or SQUIRE for a QI paper, then follow those guidelines. For journals that do not explicitly endorse these guidelines, authors should be familiar with the standards and consider them when outlining the content for their papers to ensure they include clear and complete information for readers. The guidelines also may provide a framework for organizing the paper and headings to use in it. Editors should consider which guidelines, if any, might improve the quality of manuscripts submitted to their journals and also the peer reviews of those papers. As these guidelines were not developed for nursing, we need to explore whether they are the most appropriate ones for our use and if not to develop guidelines for improved reporting in the nursing literature.

References


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