

Commentary

Title: The EQUATOR Network: Enhancing the quality and transparency of health research through the use of reporting guidelines

Douglas G Altman and Iveta Simera

Centre for Statistics in Medicine, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

on behalf of the EQUATOR Network Steering Group

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Many published studies have highlighted the unsatisfactory quality of health research reporting.¹⁻⁶ Use of reporting guidelines, which specify a minimum set of items for reporting research, can lead to improved accuracy and transparency of papers. That facilitates easier and more reliable appraisal of a paper's quality and relevance.

During the last ten years several internationally respected guidelines have been developed for reporting health research.⁷⁻¹⁰ However, those guidelines are still not widely supported by medical journals^{11;12} or adhered to by researchers, and thus their potential impact is blunted.

To remedy this situation the UK National Knowledge Service provided funding to initiate the EQUATOR project (Enhancing the QUALity and Transparency Of health Research). This new initiative seeks to improve the quality and reliability of the medical literature by promoting the transparent and accurate reporting of health research. This movement grew out of the work of CONSORT⁹ and other guideline development groups.

The EQUATOR Network is an 'umbrella' organisation that covers all areas of health research reporting. It aims to become a recognised global centre providing resources and training related to the reporting of health research and assisting in the development, dissemination and implementation of robust reporting guidelines. The EQUATOR strategic plan reflects the needs of its major

stakeholders: developers of reporting guidelines, researchers, journal editors, peer reviewers, and research funders.

One of the first EQUATOR activities was to identify existing reporting guidelines and find out how they were developed. The results of this survey (submitted to press) highlighted several important areas requiring attention. The development methods of most of the surveyed reporting guidelines were broadly similar but there was great variation in important details. Development usually took a long time and only half of the groups had strategies for dissemination and implementation of their guidelines. The difficulty of securing sufficient funding to develop, evaluate and disseminate guidelines was widely acknowledged as a major problem.

The survey results and discussions with the main stakeholders helped us to prioritise future EQUATOR activities. First, we developed a web-based resource centre, which can be freely accessed on our website (<http://www.equator-network.org/>). It provides a collection of reporting guidelines and other resources for researchers (authors of research articles), editors and peer reviewers, and developers of reporting guidelines. Resources are grouped according to the relevance to our main users. This is only the beginning: in the future, the website will host a comprehensive digital library for health research reporting, guidance for the development of robust reporting guidelines, tools facilitating their use, and educational materials.

The availability of good reporting guidelines is not sufficient for the improvement of the quality of reporting. Our second priority will be active promotion of reporting guidelines and their use by developing and running training courses for editors, peer reviewers and authors. The courses will concentrate on the important factors of research reporting and the efficient use of reporting guidelines.

Poor reporting reflects a collective failure of authors, peer reviewers and editors. Collaboration with influential medical journals and their support are vital for the success of this project. Benefits will be equally split between both communities: researchers and health professionals will benefit from more reliable scientific information while offering more accurate and reliable research reports will represent a significant competitive advantage for journals.

The EQUATOR Network will regularly monitor how journals implement reporting guidelines and will share these results with interested journals. We will conduct

annual audits of the quality of reporting across the literature and hope to document gradual improvements.

Sufficient funding is a necessary requirement for the development and implementation of robust reporting guidelines and widespread promotion of good research reporting. Considering how much money funding agencies spend on health research, their lack of interest in ensuring that this research is reported accurately is deeply disappointing. Good research reporting is not an optional extra; it is an essential component of doing good research. Research funders should recognise this and support initiatives such as EQUATOR that aim to improve the current situation.

EQUATOR Network Steering Group:

Doug Altman, Director, Centre for Statistics in Medicine, Oxford, UK

John Hoey, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

David Moher, Director, Chalmers Research Group, Ottawa, Canada

Kenneth Schulz, Vice President, Quantitative Sciences, Family Health International, Durham, USA

Authors contributions:

Both authors participated in writing and have seen and approved the final version.

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The EQUATOR Network is a new quality improvement initiative that aims to facilitate

- better reporting
- better reviewing
- better editing

of health research papers by providing resources, training and support relating to the use of reporting guidelines

'Good reporting is not an optional extra: it is an essential component of doing good research.'

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