



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group guidance paper: reporting guidelines for qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence syntheses

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Abstract

Objectives: To outline contemporary and novel developments for the presentation and reporting of syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence and provide recommendations for the use of reporting guidelines.

Study Design and Setting: An overview of reporting guidelines for qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence syntheses drawing on current international literature and the collective expert knowledge of the Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group.

Results: Several reporting guidelines exist that can be used or adapted to report syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence. Methods to develop individual guidance varied. The use of a relevant reporting guideline can enhance the transparency, consistency, and quality of reporting. Guidelines that exist are generic, method specific, and for particular aspects of the reviewing process, searching.

Conclusion: Caution is expressed over the potential for reporting guidelines to produce a mechanistic approach moving the focus away from the content and toward the procedural aspects of the review. The use of a reporting guideline is recommended and a five-step decision flowchart to guide the choice of reporting guideline is provided. Gaps remain in method-specific reporting guidelines such as mixed-study, implementation, and process evaluation evidence syntheses. © 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Qualitative evidence synthesis; Reporting guidelines; Implementation; Systematic reviews; Methods

1. Introduction

It is now almost 20 years since the appearance of the first formally developed guideline to improve the presentation, quality, and reliability of published research. What began with the publication of the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) statement to enhance the reporting of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and its subsequent updates, led to a sustained growth in development of other guidelines to enhance the reporting of other research methods [1–3]. This expansive response acknowledged the problems that arise through inadequate reporting

including, lack of transparency, clarity, and completeness associated with the research itself along with the subsequent ethical and moral consequences of inadequately reported research [3].

Such prodigious growth required focused and collaborative co-ordination of the development of reporting guidelines, particularly to reduce the then-wide variation in the methods being used to develop guidelines. From this realization grew the development of the Enhancing the Quality and Transparency of Health Research (EQUATOR) network (<http://www.equatornetwork.org/>), which was funded initially by the National Knowledge Service of the United Kingdom's National Health Service [4]. The aim of the international EQUATOR network is to improve the quality of scientific publications by assisting in the development, dissemination, and implementation of robust reporting guidelines through the provision of resources and

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What is new?**Key findings**

- This paper outlines contemporary developments around the presentation and reporting syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence.
- Existing guidelines can be used or adapted for reporting syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence. The use of a guideline can enhance the transparency, consistency, and quality of reporting. Gaps remain in method-specific reporting guidelines such as mixed-study, implementation, and process evaluation evidence syntheses.

What this adds to what was known?

- This paper highlights that much work has been undertaken to raise the standards of reporting, and projects in progress will further enhance this work. It also emphasizes the benefits of standardization and the possible unintended consequences that may result.

What is the implication and what should change now?

- In the context of the current development and debate surrounding the reporting of evidence syntheses, a 5-point “decision flowchart” has been provided to help support review authors in their choice of reporting guideline.

training [5]. The EQUATOR network offers a focus for the development of reporting guidelines and provides an invaluable repository of reporting guidelines for all research methods. It also provides a facility to register intent to develop a new reporting guideline or an extension to an existing guideline.

From these early days, development of reporting guidelines sought to improve the utility of primary research to be included within systematic reviews, which at the time were predominantly quantitative in nature. Within a decade, however, qualitative researchers also began to engage with the development of consolidated guidance for reporting qualitative methods. This effort resulted in the publication of the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research guidance (COREQ) [6]. This guidance focused on the reporting of key elements of qualitative research such as study methods, context of the study, findings, analysis, and interpretations as well as the research team. More recently, a standards for reporting qualitative research tool has been developed, consisting of 21 items aiming to improve the

transparency of all aspects of qualitative research [7]. A scoping review of emerging, qualitative, and mixed-methods evidence synthesis approaches highlighted both poor operationalization of the steps of such syntheses and the need for further empirical work to enhance this [8,9].

The development of reporting guidance for systematic reviews was contemporaneous to, and mirrors the efforts channeled into, primary research. The initial focus was the quality of reporting of meta-analyses (QUOROM) statement and subsequently followed by the guidance for the reporting of systematic reviews of effectiveness through the publication of the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) statement [10]. Subsequent work has led to extensions to the original PRISMA statement, so that the reporting of systematic reviews of other research methods and foci meet the same standards as those for reviews of RCTs. These are detailed on the EQUATOR network website (<http://www.equatornetwork.org/>).

Alongside the advancements in the reporting of systematic reviews, researchers have developed methodological guidance for systematic reviews of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence. The purpose and methodology of such reviews are detailed in earlier papers in this series. The aim of this final paper is to outline both contemporary and novel developments for the presentation and reporting of syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence. This includes a brief outline of the methodology for developing reporting guidelines and a description of current guidelines and reporting tools available. Finally, the paper outlines new developments in presentation and reporting and their associated challenges and provides recommendations for the use of reporting guidelines.

2. Methodologies for the development of a reporting guideline

Increasing recognition of the importance of reporting guidelines has been accompanied by the evolution of more rigorous methods for their development. Well-established approaches now exist for the development of new reporting guidelines. These approaches are documented, both through the EQUATOR network and elsewhere; although, it is agreed that these must accommodate a plurality of valid approaches [11]. We will not replicate the excellent advice available elsewhere, other than to highlight the importance of the use of accepted advice in the development of guidelines.

3. What guidelines are available for reporting syntheses of qualitative, implementation, and process evaluation evidence?

3.1. Reporting of aspects of synthesis methodology, for example, STARLITE

Given the challenges of co-ordinating a robust guideline for the entire qualitative, implementation, or process

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