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Uniform requirements for manuscripts, CONSORT statement and more informative abstracts: three fundamental papers for improving the quality of medical publications

Scientific literature is subject to potential misinterpretations because of inconsistencies in reporting standards. This issue has been addressed by three important papers whose objective was the improvement of final publication quality via better reporting standards. These papers are summarized below.

The first paper, "Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals",¹ gives instructions to authors on how to prepare manuscripts, rather than to editors regarding publication style. If authors were to prepare their manuscripts in the style specified in these requirements, the editors of participating journals would not find themselves having to return the manuscripts for stylistic changes before considering them for the publication process. However, journals may alter accepted manuscripts so as to conform with the details of their publication style. Authors sending manuscripts to a participating journal should therefore not try to prepare them in accordance with the publication style of that journal, but should follow the Uniform Requirements.

The second paper, the Consolidated Standards for Reporting Trials (CONSORT) statement,² gives a checklist and flow diagram. The checklist consists of 21 items mainly pertaining to the methods, results and discussion of an RCT report, and identifies key

information necessary for evaluating the internal and external validity of a report. The flow diagram provides information about the progress of patients through a 2-group parallel-design RCT, which is perhaps the most commonly reported type of trial. Appropriate adjustments would need to be made in reports of trials with larger numbers of groups or trials using different designs.

The third paper deals with structured abstracts, which were designed to permit clinical readers of medical journals to quickly judge the applicability and validity of the findings of an article for clinical practice, in accordance with common sense and widely disseminated scientific principles for the critical appraisal of medical literature which have been tested for their educational value. Additional purposes include guiding authors towards summarizing the contents of their articles more explicitly, aiding reviewers of articles submitted for publication to render critical judgements, and facilitating the use of electronic bibliographic databases. This Journal has been providing more informative abstracts ("structured abstracts") for articles of clinical interest. Structured abstracts for original studies require authors to systematically disclose the objective, basic research design, clinical setting, participants, interventions (if any), measurements made on the main outcome,

results and conclusions.

The São Paulo Medical Journal (Revista Paulista de Medicina) endorses the uniform requirement for manuscripts, the CONSORT statement and more informative abstracts because of their high relevance to publications in medical science, and suggests that potential authors should follow them when preparing articles for submission to any important medical journal.

REFERENCES

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. *Ann Intern Med* 1997;126(1):36-47.
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3. Haynes RB, Mulrow CD, Huth EJ, Altman DG, Gardner MJ. More informative abstracts revisited. *Ann Intern Med* 1990;113(1):69-76.