

Reviewer's report

Title: Instructions to authors on case reporting: A survey of a core journals list

Version: 2 Date: 24 December 2003

Reviewer: Linda Ohler

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

While others have looked at guidelines for authors, I do not think any have so extensively and specifically reviewed guidelines for case reports. The authors well define the purpose of their study.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The methods are fairly well described. I wondered about the term "survey". I was expecting the survey to be questions that editors responded to rather than a review of websites containing instructions or authors. Perhaps the term survey is being used in a more expansive definition.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

There is a minor issue of the percentages being rounded off to 50% in the results section of the summary/abstract and reported as 49.7% in the results section in the body of the text. This is also done with 23.3% vs 23% in reporting the data. Not a major problem but it should be consistently reported.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting data deposition?

Yes. I think the authors should report on the recommendations for case studies from the International Committee for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). While the authors are reporting what they found in reviewing instructions for authors, the ICMJE has clearly provided guidance on confidentiality and informed consent in case reports/case studies. It would seem like this would be good background information for this manuscript. I am not familiar with reporting which author did what tasks for the data collection and/or analysis of data for the manuscript. For instance the manuscript tells readers that OS and OO independently categorized the journals..... I think that information should be excluded. I think the authors' contributions should be excluded at the end of the manuscript.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

I found the discussion to be interesting. With regard to consent, I am not certain it is the responsibility of a journal to provide authors with an informed consent document from a patient or family. With the HIPAA regulations in the United States, individual institutions may find that this is the hospital's responsibility and that their legal department develop an informed consent document for publication in a medical journal.

I think that Table 2 created by the authors could include more information for writing case reports, based on findings in this study. Consent is not addressed in this checklist. In the Introduction section of the checklist in this table, I would include the following:

1. Describe how this case is unique.
2. Describe how this case contributes to scientific knowledge
3. Describe the instructive or teaching points that add value to this case.

Should this checklist include what patient information should be avoided in a publication? It seems that would be quite instructive and I think journals would vary on their requirements.

I found the information in Table 1 and Figure 1 to be confusing in the following areas:

1. Limit on pages is 34 in the "yes" column but no number in the "unreported" column. These figures seem different from what is reported on Table 1.

2. The consent form required (29) is the same in both Table 1 and Figure 1 which is good. However this is not true for all reporting.

3. Indexing key words reports 61 "yes" and 84 "unresponsive" in Figure 1 but reports 145 in Table 1. If 84 were unresponsive, how can they be included in Table 1 as reporting indexing key words. Perhaps I am missing something. Please clarify.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

The results/percentages must be uniformly reported between the abstract and the text. I think the title that best reflects the manuscript may be:

Instructions to authors for case reporting are limited: A survey of a core journal list. I had trouble with the word deficient....It seems that deficient implies there is a standard and I think this manuscript reminds us that there is no standard.

7. Is the writing acceptable?

Yes. I do think the pages should be numbered.

References: References are current with the majority being within the last 5 years. I would like to see the ICMJE recommendations referenced.

I would recommend Minor Essential Revisions:

1. Percentages must be consistently reported
2. Include recommendations from ICMJE on case studies/reports
3. Add more depth of information to Table 2 to make it more comprehensive.
4. Please check the data on Tables 1 and Figure 1 to ensure accuracy. I found the data reported in these tables/figures to be confusing.

I recommend this paper for publication following the above recommendations for revisions.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions