

STROBE: strongly recommended by IJPH – but not enforced!

Thomas Kohlmann

Dear Readers,

Empirical research is the core of almost all modern scientific disciplines. In some of these disciplines the prevailing methodological approach is the experimental design, in others observational research plays the dominant role. Public Health and Epidemiology clearly belong to the latter group of scientific disciplines: Health surveys of populations or risk factor surveillance studies as well as most studies in the field of descriptive or analytical epidemiology are typically conducted as cross-sectional, retrospective or prospective observational studies.

It has been argued that reporting of results from observational studies in the published literature is highly variable as authors of articles chose different ways of presenting the background, methods and results of their research. Hence, in published articles relevant aspects of a study may not be described in enough detail, they may be presented in a way that makes it difficult for the reader to extract the relevant information, or, in the worst case, relevant information may not be presented at all. In such cases understanding and interpretation of study results can be a difficult task for readers and comparability of findings with results from other studies can be substantially restricted.

Careful evaluation of submitted manuscripts by journal editors and reviewers is probably the best means to ensure completeness and consistency of scientific articles. However, evaluation criteria themselves are variable and editors or reviewers may not always identify all important but missing information. On this background, a group of renowned epidemiologists and statisticians has recently published a set of recommendations aiming at “Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE)”.¹ The core of the STROBE guideline is a checklist comprising 22 items

that should be addressed in reports of observational studies. The checklist is intended to be used by authors, journal editors and reviewers as a guidance for preparation and critical appraisal of manuscripts. For the interested reader we have included the STROBE checklist in this issue of IJPH.

Initiatives like that of the STROBE group are not always unanimously welcomed and accepted in the scientific community. While one group of researchers may expect that this guideline can substantially contribute to improving the standards and quality of published articles on observational studies, another group may hesitate to accept the potential constraints imposed by the guideline. Both views are reflected in the two contributions from the IJPH Editorial Board found in the “Editors’ Corner” in this issue of the journal.

Generally, the editors of IJPH encourage authors to consult the STROBE checklist in the context of manuscript preparation. The checklist, which will later be included in our instructions for authors, provides a set of general recommendations that will help authors to identify important information to be addressed in an article. Yet, it is up to the authors to decide which of the checklist items are applicable to their study and which may be of little relevance. A good manuscript will not be rejected just because some STROBE items are not addressed - if this omission is justified by the specific topic or methodology of the study. On the other hand, strict adherence to STROBE will certainly not increase acceptability of poor manuscripts.

The editors of IJPH are well aware of potential problems arising from the uncritical use of formal checklists for the writing of manuscripts. But we are also firmly convinced that in many instances good manuscripts can greatly benefit from being appropriately “strobed”.

Thomas Kohlmann
Editor-in-Chief

References

1. von Elm E, Altman DG, Egger N, Pocock SJ, Gøtzsche PC, Vandenbroucke JP for the STROBE Initiative (2007). The Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) Statement: guidelines for reporting observational studies. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 85: 867–72.

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