

SWAR 11: Comparison of contacting non-responding authors of included studies by telephone versus email for additional study information

Objective of this SWAR

To investigate the impact on response rates to tailored surveys of telephoning non-responding authors for additional information versus continuing to email them, and associated costs

Study area: Data collection, Author contact, Cost of review practices

Sample type: Original researchers

Estimated funding level needed: Medium

Background

Research publications often fail to include sufficient detail to include, assess, and summarize a study's findings in a systematic review.[1,2] Contacting authors for additional information is commonly recommended to confirm study eligibility,[3,4] obtain missing or unreported outcomes,[3–6] and clarify study methods.[5] The issue of incomplete reporting, and the need to address it, may be even more acute in reviews of complex interventions where consensus on intervention terminology is lacking,[7] descriptions of interventions are typically incomplete,[8,9] and variation in components, as well as their interactions with study-specific characteristics, are believed to influence variation in study effects.[10] Contacting authors for additional information on intervention components and potential effect modifiers may therefore be required to ensure appropriate coding of these predictors of intervention effects and support more sophisticated models for exploring heterogeneity. Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence of the effectiveness of contacting the original authors for more information when conducting a systematic reviews (i.e., most effective strategies, associated costs, value of information received and ultimate impact on review findings).[1,5,11]

In the recent update of a systematic review of diabetes quality improvement interventions, key features of the intervention, population, and setting were poorly reported.[12,13] To address these gaps, the review team (including knowledge users) developed a tailored survey to enrich the review dataset by capturing additional information about intervention content, study population and context for all 279 studies included in the updated review.[14] The goal of obtaining additional information from the survey was to reduce potential misspecification of intervention components and obtain additional data on intervention, population, and setting factors that may be used to explore effect heterogeneity.[13] Unfortunately, only 27% of authors (n=76) completed the survey after three email contact attempts, leaving large gaps of information remaining.

In conducting the author survey, we observed that speaking to an author by telephone (e.g., to address survey troubleshooting issues) led to a positive researcher-researcher interaction and subsequent survey completion. We wondered whether contacting additional non-responding authors by telephone would improve rates of survey completion. Given the paucity of evidence guiding author contact in general, we decided to evaluate this in a randomized trial.

Therefore, the objective of this SWAR is to investigate the impact of telephoning non-responding authors versus continuing to email them for a further three contact attempts (i.e., requests 4, 5 and 6), with respect to survey completion and associated costs. We anticipate that findings from this study may inform methodological and budgeting decisions for future systematic reviews.

Interventions and comparators

Intervention 1: Authors in the email group will receive up to three additional email requests (contacts 4, 5 and 6) to complete the online survey. Emails will be sent to their most recent author contact email and will include the survey links and article PDFs. The email will note the deadline to complete the survey, which will be three weeks from the date of the first email.

Intervention 2: Authors in the telephone group will receive up to three additional requests to complete the online survey (contacts 4, 5 and 6) but these will be by telephone, with an email follow-up to consenting authors. The researcher will aim to speak with the author directly to promote their completion of the survey and offer assistance with the survey platform, if necessary.

Index Type:

Method for allocating to intervention or comparator

Randomisation

Outcome measures

Primary: Proportion of authors who complete the survey

Secondary: Time to deliver the interventions and associated costs

Analysis plans

Response rates in the two groups will be compared using an adjusted odds ratio and corresponding 95% confidence interval (adjusted for stratification variable: decade of trial conduct). Time to deliver the interventions will be reported descriptively and used to calculate the cost of delivering the intervention in total, and per completed survey, within each intervention group. Specifically, the cost of delivering each intervention will be calculated using the observed time per intervention multiplied by upper and lower salary range for a typical staff likely to contact authors in a review (e.g., research assistant). The salary range will be obtained from pay scales at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute and be based in Canadian dollars.

Possible problems in implementing this SWAR

While the present sample cannot be increased to meet power requirements, it would have 75-92% power to detect a difference of effect equivalent to increasing a 10% response rate in the email group by 15-20% in the telephoning group. Adequacy of power to support study conclusions will be reassessed during analysis.

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Publications or presentations of this SWAR design

Examples of the implementation of this SWAR

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Date of idea: 15/AUG/2016

Revisions made by:

Date of revisions: