Author’s response to reviews

Title: Effect of paper quality on the response rate to a postal survey: A randomised controlled trial

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PDF covering letter
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Electronic manuscript submission

Dear Sir,

**Re. “Effect of paper quality on the response to a postal survey: A randomised controlled trial”**

ISRCTN 32032031

Thank you for your helpful comments and those of the referees.

We have complied with all of these in our revisions (see attached table with all revisions listed). I hope the manuscript is now acceptable for publication in your journal.

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

T. J. Clark
(corresponding author)
Effect of paper quality on the response rate to a postal survey: A randomised controlled trial.
T Justin Clark, Janesh K Gupta and Khalid S Khan.

Point-by-point responses to each referees comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referees Comments</th>
<th>Authors response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dr C Fischbacher</strong></td>
<td>The following sentence have been added to the results section on page 4:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is little information about the target population and no information about the relative characteristics of those in the intervention and control groups.</td>
<td>There were no differences between the intervention and control groups responding as regards postgraduate certification (e.g. Membership of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (95% versus 93%) and consultant grade (79% versus 75%).</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is not clear why the response rates were so low or whether they have a bearing on the results of the study.</td>
<td>Response rates to postal surveys are declining and this is the reason why effective strategies to improve return rates need to be developed. We have added the following sentences to the discussion section on page 4:</td>
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<tr>
<td>The low response rate in our survey may have resulted from the content our questionnaire as it enquired about research issues and so it is more likely that those with an active interest were likely to respond. However, any such selection biases should be minimised by the randomisation process and does not therefore affect the internal validity of our findings. The low response to our survey does limit the external validity or generalisability of our findings.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>It is not clear how the group allocation could have been concealed from the study participants</td>
<td>The following sentence has been added to the methods section (page 3) to clarify this:</td>
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<tr>
<td>The relative rate of response should have been 0.75 rather than 0.8</td>
<td>The participants were not informed of the randomisation to paper quality.</td>
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<td>The interpretation of the results is not correct. The study lacks the power to reliably exclude a 15% increase in response rates. The difference in the response rates between the groups was 7.3% and the 95% confidence interval for this difference was –1.3% to 16.0%.</td>
<td>We agree and have changed the manuscript (page 4, last sentence to:</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The relative rate of response to the questionnaire printed on high quality paper compared to standard quality was therefore 0.75 (95% CI 0.53-1.05, p=0.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have stated this in the second line of our discussion (page 4) where we said:</td>
<td>‘Our power assumptions were not borne out by the response rates and some may argue that the apparent lack of an effect may be due to an inadequate sample. However, this would not explain a trend towards a lower response rate in the group allocated high quality paper.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We agree that the difference in response rates between the groups was 7.3% (95% CI –1.3% to 15%) in favour of standard quality paper. If high quality paper does increase</td>
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</table>
results are therefore compatible with a true difference (i.e. benefit) of up to 16% between the intervention and control groups. response, then this will be modest (up to 1.3%). Conversely, the results are compatible with a reduction in response (i.e. ‘disbenefit’) of up to 16%.

It would have been of interest to know the relative cost of the intervention

The following has been added to the discussion (page 5):

Dr Jean-Francois Etter

a- ……intervention was probably not detectable by study participants……..

b- it would be more correct to say “With the expected sample size, the study had 80% power to detect a statistically significant difference at the level of alpha=0.05.

c- to avoid bias in meta-analysis, even negative trials should be published, i.e. including this one.

d- The literature review could be more comprehensive…..

This is possible and has been stated in the discussion (page 5) where we said: ‘It may be that the 20 gram difference between paper weight in the two groups was too small so that recipients of ‘high’ quality paper did not readily distinguish it from their general day to day paperwork.’

The penultimate sentence of the methods section (page 3-4) has been changed in line with this comments to:

We agree with this statement

The following paragraph has been added to page 5 of the discussion:

Postal surveys are widely used because they represent a cost effective method of obtaining information from large numbers of geographically disparate medical professionals about their attributes, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs. It is of concern that response rates are declining [1] and therefore there is a need to develop effective strategies, in addition to the content of questionnaire itself, [6] to counter this trend. Data from primary and secondary research have indicated that prenotifying recipients, personalising questionnaires and providing follow up letters improves response rates. [7-9] Other potentially useful techniques include the colour of
questionnaires, sponsorship from academic institutions, inclusion of return envelopes and utilising monetary and non-monetary incentives. [7-9] In contrast, provision of pens, [3] the use of covering letters, assurances of anonymity and stating deadlines did not increase rates of return. [8] Studies have reported conflicting findings regarding the effect of “help the researcher” type of appeals in covering letters [8,9] and the provision of return postage. [9,10] although the type of return postage provided appears to influence response. [10] To our knowledge the effect of paper quality on response rates to postal surveys has not been previously tested in a randomised controlled trial.

Editorial comments

CONSORT

The following sentence has been added to the end of the methods section:

The trial results were reported according to the CONSORT guidelines. [5]

ISRCTN

ISRCTN 32032031 added to paper title

Figure 1

The figure on page 10 has been cropped and the legend removed and placed separately after the reference section.