Reviewer’s report

Title: Using e-mail recruitment and an online questionnaire to establish effect size

Version: 1 Date: 6 December 2010

Reviewer: Helen Atherton

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Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1. For clarity’s sake, and to match up with the questionnaire in the appendix, you may wish to describe the intervention (pgs 4/5) as the e-PIS:

2. ‘Participants will be randomised to the intervention (participant determines the amount of information they wish to access via a web-based system, the e-PIS).

3. Is the cost of £1000 for the intervention a theoretical cost, or the actual cost? It would be interesting to know.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

4. Throughout this article I was confused by the terminology – often it was difficult to make the distinction between where you were talking about this study and the hypothetical study that you used in the questionnaire. Specific examples of this are found in the following places with examples for how to make it clearer in brackets:

5. Abstract, Methods: ‘It asked participants how much they would need to see recruitment rates increase by (in the hypothetical study) before they would consider using the intervention in their research.’ Reading the abstract before any other element of the study (as many people do) I wasn’t sure whether the recruitment rates concerned the intervention or the email recruitment.

6. Abstract, Results: ‘Dependent upon (the) baseline recruitment result (presented to experts in the questionnaire), experts wanted recruitment rate to increase from 6.9% to 28.9% before they would consider using the (hypothetical) intervention’ At present this sentence is not clear if just reading the abstract alone. I think you should make it clearer what you mean by baseline recruitment rates for those who have not seen the questionnaire in the appendix. I had to read it a few times before I realised you were not referring to the use of an online questionnaire – the title of the study implies that the efficacy of the use of email recruitment/online questionnaire is what is being explored.

7. Results, pg 6: ‘The effect size participants wanted from the intervention increased as the baseline recruitment rate (in the questionnaire) decreased’

8. Discussion, pg 7: ‘The results of the questionnaire demonstrate that for this
scenario (increasing recruitment rates), even though the cost of the (proposed e-PIS) intervention was relatively low,...’

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

9. I strongly feel that you should make changes to the title. On reading the title I expected to read a study focused more on recruitment via email and online questionnaires, and so the use of terms like ‘recruitment’ and ‘intervention’ throughout and referring to the questionnaire content rather than this study were misleading. Currently the title is vague and the study could be about any number of different things; using email to recruit, using online questionnaires, establishing effect size for an unspecified purpose. You require a title which gives a clear message about what you are doing and in order to do that the study requires a clear message. As I understand it you are trying to establish an estimate for effect size for use in a sample size calculation for an RCT, where an effect size is not currently available for the particular intervention – an electronic PIS. In order to do this, you are canvassing the opinion of experts, using a questionnaire with an online format and administered to experts via email. I am currently unclear as to which element you are most interested in getting across here – methods used to administer (email/online) or response of participants with regard to effect size for this particular intervention.

10. How did you produce the questionnaire? Was it based on evidence? If not, what was the rationale for compiling it in the way you did? Was it piloted? What was the rationale for the baseline recruitment rates used in the questionnaire? Are there any references available to back up your decision? If I were to use your methodology I would like to know how you made the decision about costs given and recruitment rates given. These are all important factors if others are to utilise your methodology.

11. Similarly I would like to know more about your study participants. What sort of clinical trials were they involved with? How extensively did you search for experts? Do the MRC hubs incorporate the clinical trials units up and down the country?

12. You explain that 26 participants failed to complete the questionnaire. Please could you provide some information on how far through the questionnaire they got? Did you have compulsory questions? The reason this is important is because if others are to utilise your methodology they will need to know if there was something in particular that put people off completing it.

13. I would disagree that ‘the effect size estimates are therefore likely to represent the opinion of the research community.’ You only managed to get opinions from 38 academics, of unknown origin (as I mention above in discretionary revisions, I would want to know more about the origin of your sample and who you asked). You had a further 26 fail to complete. You provide no information about these two groups and how they differ (institution, subject area etc). You do not provide enough information to allow me to decide if your
sample is generalisable and you do not discuss this issue at any point. It is misleading to presume otherwise.

14. Throughout this study, and especially in the discussion, there is a lack of referencing. You discuss possible reasons for non-response/completion, including the method of delivery (online rather than paper). There are several references you could use (I suggest a couple below but there are lots more available).


Yun GW, Trumbo CW. Comparative Response to a Survey Executed by Post, E-mail, & Web Form. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 2000; 6(1)

It is well known that response rates to postal questionnaires are low, and this gives you an opportunity to discuss the potential merits of an email approach, however you do not do this.

15. On page 8 you state ‘if this methodology is to be used by other researchers in their studies, care needs to be taken in choosing those participants who have sufficient expertise and whose views are likely to influence practice.’ This is a given, but as you don’t say anything in this manuscript about your participants (clinical vs non-clinical, institution type, specialist area) I cannot tell if this is what you have achieved in this study. I am also still unsure as to exactly what you wanted to achieve – an effect size or a test of the feasibility of the methods (using an email to recruit).

16. My concluding comments on this manuscript concern the message of the paper. Given this is a methodology journal I would have liked to see more focus on the methods used, and the transferability/generalisability of the methods. I would also have liked to more discussion of the methodology used (pros and cons) in the discussion section and fewer assumptions about the applicability of the method. There was simply not enough detail nor discussion to allow me to assess the strategy for estimating effect size.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare I have no competing interests