Reviewer's report

Title: Effect on survey response rate of hand written versus printed signature on a covering letter: randomised controlled trial

Version: 1 Date: 8 April 2005

Reviewer: PHIL EDWARDS

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General
This is a report of a large randomised controlled trial of the effect on response rates of sending questionnaires with hand-signed letters rather than letters with printed (electronically scanned) signatures. The question posed (personalised cover letters) is not new, but the population in which the intervention was evaluated is new (i.e. study participants are physicians). The methods are appropriate and well described. There are a few places where additional information about methods could be provided. The data appear to be sound. The meta-analysis data (Figure 3) are not all correct and complete at present. The data from one included study are incorrect, and a study is missing altogether. The corrections required are unlikely to alter the conclusions. The sample size calculation is correct – the study had 80% power to detect an absolute difference in response rates of 4% assuming 70% response in the control group. The authors have included a figure in line with CONSORT. The discussion and conclusions are balanced and adequately supported by the data. The writing is clear and grammatically correct and the title and abstract convey what has been found.

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

The authors have omitted one study from their meta-analysis: Green KE, Stager SF. The effects of personalization, sex, locale, and level taught on educators' responses to a mail survey. Journal of Experimental Education 1986;54:203-6. The data from this trial were as follows: 138 participants responded out of 166 allocated to receive letters with a hand-written signature, compared with 146 participants responding out of 188 allocated to receive letters with a typed signature.

The data for the trial by Christie et al (1985) are incorrect in the meta-analysis. The data included are the results of the trial of handwritten addresses on envelopes. The correct data should be 156 responses out of 250 allocated to receive letters with a hand-written signature, compared with 160 out of 250 allocated to receive letters with a printed signature.

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

Abstract – background: the systematic review cited actually suggests that any form of personalisation (e.g. letters, questionnaires and envelopes) improve response rates. The text should be amended.

Introduction – first and second sentences of second paragraph: as above, the systematic review presents the effects of personalised materials, not just covering letters.

Introduction – fourth sentence: five of the studies evaluated the effects of hand-signing the covering
Discussion – the first sentence is too strong. The results indicate that a hand-signed covering letter did not appear to increase response. But they are also compatible with a relative decrease of 2% and a relative increase in response of 4%. The sample size was sufficient to detect a difference in response rates between the intervention and control groups of 4%, but it was not sufficient to detect any amount smaller than this. Therefore, as the authors recognise, there may be a very small advantage.

Discussion – The result of the meta-analysis may change when the corrections (see major revisions above) are made.

Figure 1 –in the boxes at the foot of the figure that show the numbers returned there should also be the percentage that was returned in each allocation group.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Methods – setting and participants: it would be interesting to know how many questions were included in the three page questionnaire.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.