

General Comments on version 1 of STROBE checklist (2004/05)

Several people voiced concerns that the intent of the present checklist could be misunderstood: STROBE may be perceived as overly prescriptive or dogmatic. One commentator stated that “observational studies differ from clinical trials or meta-analyses in one key respect: the latter are much more narrowly constructed, which makes explicit guidelines practical. By comparison, even the best observational studies are idiosyncratic. It would be impossible to identify rules that apply equally to all. For this reason, extrapolation from experience with CONSORT would be an error.” In contrast, another person observed that the STROBE initiative should be “as similar as possible to CONSORT”. We plan to clarify the scope and intended application of STROBE in the article accompanying the checklist as well as in the “explanation and elaboration” (E&E) paper. STROBE should assist authors writing articles on epidemiological studies that contain the essential information needed to appraise the study. We stress that STROBE is neither a tool for assessing the quality of submitted or published manuscripts, nor a strict guideline that should be followed ad verbatim.

The use of the word “standard” in the initiative’s original name (Standards for the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology) has been criticised, for the reasons outlined above. Suggested alternative titles included “Reporting Observational Studies in Epidemiology” (ROSE) and “Guidelines for Reporting in Observational Epidemiology” (GROE). We decided to keep the acronym STROBE, which is already quite widely known, but to change its meaning to “Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology”.

The restriction to the three study designs cohort, case-control, and cross-sectional studies also generated debate. The inclusion of additional designs, for example, nested case-control studies or ecological studies has been proposed. We stress that the present checklist is a beginning. In analogy to the CONSORT recommendations on parallel group randomised trials, STROBE may later be extended to other study designs.

Several comments concerned the order of items, in particular in the Discussion section. As mentioned above, we believe that the exact order of items is secondary, as long as the item is addressed somewhere in the article.

Commentators emphasized that a policy for implementation of the checklist is desirable including the translation to other languages and training of potential “consumers” (e.g. workshops with researchers). We aim to publish translations of the checklist and accompanying article soon after the English language version and welcome any commitment to help with translating and disseminating the list to additional readerships.