The STROBE Extensions

Considerations for Development

To the Editor:

A decade after the publication of the STROBE (STrengthening the Reporting of Observational studies in Epidemiology) Statement, we use this anniversary as a time to reflect on STROBE’s impact and future avenues for addressing the incomplete reporting of observational studies.1,2 As an aid to authors, the STROBE Statement and an explanation and elaboration article were published in 2007 with generic guidance for reporting cohort, case–control, or cross-sectional studies. Subsequently, several extensions to STROBE were published, some including authors involved in the original Statement, to provide more nuanced and tailored guidance.3–15 In principal, these

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efforts are valuable, but inconsistencies may arise because extension production is not coordinated, and there is no clear guidance on their creation.

We qualitatively assessed the published STROBE extensions to identity perceived gaps and deficiencies in the current STROBE checklist and to detect nonspecific or redundant guidance. As detailed in the protocol,16 as of 1 March2017, we found 13 STROBE extensions.3–15 Collectively, there were 298 additions to the STROBE checklist (Table 1). Most additions were directly related to the field on which the extension was focused but, based on independent coding by two reviewers, over one third were not specific to the extension’s field. Rather, they were general epidemiologic or methodologic tenets applicable to most observational research (e.g., details about potential confounders, biases, etc.). The Methods section contained the most changed or added items, one third of which were nonspecific changes (Table 1).

Nonspecific additions were mainly in the following areas (Table 2):
- Participants, including sample size rationale, changes in exposure status, time points of assessment, and recruitment details;
- Potential confounders and biases;
- Subgroup and sensitivity analyses;
- Generalizability;
- Ethics disclosure/approval; and
- Access to supplemental information (e.g., open source data, code, or protocols).

These results, highlighting nonspecific recommendations, complement previous research demonstrating particular problems with the reporting of bias, study size calculations, and subgroup and sensitivity analyses.17,18 Nonspecific additions were of particular concern when they were found to be nearly identical to original STROBE checklist items (Table 3).

While the focused nature of the extensions varies widely, nonspecific additions could represent perceived gaps in content or indicate that information in the explanation and elaboration should be included in the checklist. Checklists provide valuable structure to research articles and serve as a reminder of what should be considered while writing. One cannot expect that all relevant epidemiologic or statistical information will be included; however, the trend of extensions adding general epidemiologic tenets points to a different reality.

The majority of additions made across the extensions were valuable, field-specific recommendations that experts in their respective disciplines determined necessary to report. However, nonspecific and redundant suggestions should not be ignored. EQUATOR (the Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of Health Research) Network guidance for guideline developers is a useful starting point to the process of how to develop an extension,19 but more direction is needed in terms of what to report about the process. For example, why it was deemed necessary to duplicate existing items in different words or to add nonspecific information.

Erik von Elm conceived of reporting guidelines as life jackets, not strait jackets.20 STROBE is not meant to be a strict and rigid list, hence why many authors have used it as a base for their own more focused extensions. However, redundant or nonspecific content additions may create confusion rather than help. STROBE is an “evolving document that requires continual assessment, refinement, and if necessary change.”21 The adaptable nature of STROBE is indispensable to its successful implementation. Updating STROBE was discussed at a 2010 meeting,21 but only minor revisions were identified, thus not justifying a new version of the guidelines; perhaps, this should now be reconsidered.
Describe the main limitations of the data sources and assessment methods used and implications for Authors should provide information on how to access any supplemental information such as the Describe informed consent and approval from ethical committee(s). Specify whether samples were Report any sensitivity analysis (e.g., exclusion of misreporters or outliers) and data imputation, if Describe the intervention/exposure with sufficient detail to permit replication Report results of any adjustments for multiple comparisons Provide reasons (epidemiological and clinical) for choosing matching criteria Indicate the time points for assessment of serial follow-up TABLE 2. Examples of Nonspecific Additions Added in STROBE Extensions “Indicate the time points for assessment of serial follow-up” “Provide reasons (epidemiological and clinical) for choosing matching criteria” “Explain the length of time planned to follow participants for determination of outcomes” “Report results of any adjustments for multiple comparisons” “Describe the intervention/exposure with sufficient detail to permit replication” “Describe any unique restrictions placed on the study sample size” “Report any sensitivity analysis (e.g., exclusion of misreporters or outliers) and data imputation, if applicable” “Describe informed consent and approval from ethical committee(s). Specify whether samples were anonymous, anonymized or identifiable” “Authors should provide information on how to access any supplemental information such as the study protocol, raw data, or programming code” “Describe the main limitations of the data sources and assessment methods used and implications for the interpretation of the findings” TABLE 3. Examples of Redundant Suggestions

| Proposed Addition in Extension | Extension | Corresponding Original STROBE Item |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1a) Indicate that the study was an observational study and, if applicable, use a common study design term | STROBE-VET (Veterinary research)\(^{11}\) | 1 Indicate the study’s design with a commonly used term in the title or the abstract |
| 6a) Provide a clear definition of the exposed and nonexposed cohorts. Justify the choice of comparator | STROBE-EULAR (Rheumatology)\(^{5}\) | 6a) Give the eligibility criteria and the sources and methods of selection of participants. Describe methods of follow-up |
| 7(a) If applicable, clearly define all outcomes, correlates, predictors, potential confounders, effect modifiers, and diagnostic criteria | STROBE-RDS (Response-Driven Sampling)\(^{14}\) | (b) For matched studies, give matching criteria and number of exposed and unexposed |
| 7.6 Include description of potential confounders (other than epidemiological variables) | STROBE-AMS (Antimicrobial Stewardship)\(^{4}\) | 7 Clearly define all outcomes, exposures, predictors, potential confounders, and effect modifiers. Give diagnostic criteria if applicable |
| 8 Provide evidence to support the validity and reliability of assessment tools in this context (if available) | STROBE-SBR (Simulation-Based Research)\(^{10}\) | 7 Clearly define all outcomes, exposures, predictors, potential confounders, and effect modifiers. Give diagnostic criteria if applicable |

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Re: Associations Between Childhood Thyroid Cancer and External Radiation Dose After the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant Accident

To the Editor:

Ohira et al.1 examined the association between childhood thyroid cancer and external radiation dose in Fukushima Prefecture. They concluded that “follow-up studies should be recommend for several years before any conclusions can be drawn.” In this letter, we make three points that must be addressed if recommendations for action are to be based on reliable evidence.

First, Ohira et al.1 estimated individual external doses for defining exposure levels. However, the effect of radiation on thyroid cancer incidence is far more potent from internal radiation by radioactive iodine than from external exposures.2 Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the dispersion of radioactive iodine is different from that of cesium, the main source of external radiation.3 The dispersion of radioactive iodine was toward the south, while cesium was dispersed toward the northwest. Therefore, external radiation exposure estimation tends to have a problem of nondifferential exposure misclassification, which introduces bias toward the null.4 Ohira et al.5 corroborate this pattern of dispersion. Yet, in their letter, they suggest that the thyroid cancer excess is attributable to internal radiation rather than to external sources.

Second, Ohira et al.1 did their analysis using only an internal comparison within Fukushima Prefecture. In March 2011, radioactive iodine was detected not only in most of Fukushima Prefecture but also around the Tokyo metropolitan area. When exposures are so widely dispersed, to estimate the exposure effect validly, researchers should also compare disease rates in the target population with as uncontaminated a control group as possible. As indicated in our article5 and in the related follow-up correspondence,6 more valid external comparisons were indeed possible.

Third, Ohira et al.1 used only the first round of screening. It is well known that some researchers7,8 refuted the “screening effect” hypothesis of excess thyroid cancer after the Chernobyl accident to end the controversy about the relationship between that accident and excess thyroid cancer.9 In Fukushima, the large excesses that were detected in the second and third rounds of screening also refute the hypothesis.10 To address these points, we have reported our latest findings at successive annual conferences of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE) since 2013. Finally, the ISEE Executive wrote a letter expressing some of the concerns noted here to the prefecture in 2016.11 To date, no response has been received.

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