

Postal Surveys: Is it Worth the Effort?

Editor - We recently conducted a postal survey on the current practice of cemented total hip replacements amongst Malaysian orthopaedic surgeons. A questionnaire was sent together with a stamped self-addressed envelope to all the "members" of the Malaysian Orthopaedic Association (MOA) on our behalf by the MOA as it is the policy of the MOA not to release the corresponding addresses of its members. The MOA has a total of 191 members at last count and a total of 250 surveys were left in the care of the MOA.

We received a total of 45 replies by post, 7 replies by direct enquiries to the members during the Malaysian Orthopaedic Association Annual Scientific Meeting and 3 more by direct enquiries from colleagues at work who incidentally had not received the questionnaires by post. That still left us with a total of 55 replies out of a possible 191, representing a response rate of less than 30%. We had several anecdotal responses during the MOA annual scientific meeting from members who had not replied that the reason for their not replying to the survey was because they did not perform cemented total hip replacements. This left us with a dilemma. Although the response rate was not high, it may be more representative of the current practice of members who do perform cemented total hip replacements than the response rate suggests. Is it worthwhile re-sending the questionnaires to all the members again?

As the survey was anonymous and the questionnaires were sent by the MOA, it was not possible to only re-send the questionnaires to members who had not replied (targeted survey) as we do not know who the non-responders were. Would a higher response rate mean that some members might have replied twice? In addition, the survey was self funded (no research grants

were sought) and to re-send the questionnaires would double the cost and time invested by the investigators. The advantages of re-sending were that we may be able to obtain a higher response rate and also had the opportunity of rephrasing and improving the clarity of the questions which had caused some confusion amongst members who had previously replied.

Ultimately, we decided to re-send the questionnaires to all the members of the MOA. We received a further 19 replies following this. The overall response rate to this survey was therefore 39%. This response rate was still considerably lower than surveys conducted in the United Kingdom. (Hashemi-Nejad et al, 1994 (66%); Bankes et al, 1999 (69%)²). Is a response rate of about 30% a fairly average response following a postal survey in Malaysia? If it was, would it be reasonable to conclude that postal surveys may not be a worthwhile method of conducting research in Malaysia because the findings would always be hampered by the fact that it may not be a representation of the true picture due to its low response rate? Would other investigators have re-sent the questionnaires? We wonder if this is a common dilemma amongst previous investigators and what would they have done under the circumstances.

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