

first contact

First contact with investigators regarding information from a randomised trial

A randomised trial into methodology for Cochrane reviews

firstcontact@mrc-bsu.cam.ac.uk

<http://www.mrc-bsu.cam.ac.uk/firstcontact>



What is First Contact?

First Contact is a randomised trial into one important aspect of the methodology of Cochrane reviews. It looks at how trialists can be contacted to request information that they have not published. Unfortunately, the lack of information in many reports makes it very difficult to work out what went on in some trials and to extract sufficient data for useful meta-analyses.

This leaflet provides a brief introduction to First Contact. If you are preparing a Cochrane review and intend to write to authors of studies for additional information, we urge you to consider joining the trial.



What is involved?

The success of First Contact depends on at least 75 Cochrane reviewers agreeing to take part. Cochrane reviewers from any area are welcome, and the minimum number of authors of trial reports to which a reviewer wishes to write is only one. Participation in the trial involves:

- registering interest with the First Contact team, and obtaining the protocol, guidelines for participation and data collection forms;
- submitting brief details of the trialists to be written to and receiving, in return, a randomised allocation;
- amending some pre-supplied example letters to request missing information, as appropriate;
- proceeding with the allocated intervention, waiting for the follow-up period and returning completed data collection forms to us.



How do I participate in First Contact?

Full details of how to join First Contact are given on the web site. It is as simple as emailing firstcontact@mrc-bsu.cam.ac.uk with your name, review title and review group. We will send you an identifier and you are ready to start having your investigators randomised into the trial.



Organisation of First Contact

First Contact is co-ordinated by Dr Julian Higgins at the MRC Biostatistics Unit in Cambridge, UK. The steering group for the trial includes experienced systematic reviewers and methodologists from Cambridge, Oxford, London and Manchester.

Randomisation will take place centrally at the UK Cochrane Centre in Oxford, and analysis at the MRC Biostatistics Unit in Cambridge.



How can I find out more?

Full information about First Contact, including up-to-date recruitment figures and, in the latter stages of the trial, current results, are available at

<http://www.mrc-bsu.cam.ac.uk/firstcontact>

For additional information email

firstcontact@mrc-bsu.cam.ac.uk



First Contact: A potted protocol

Background
A study can be properly and fully included in a systematic review only if all important information is available to the reviewer. To obtain missing information, systematic reviewers might approach the people responsible for the studies they have identified, but there is a great deal of uncertainty about which method of first contact is most effective. This relates both to the establishment that contact details are correct and to the collection of information that was missing for the study.

- A pre-notification letter (or email) will request updated contact details, give notice of the forthcoming request and, hopefully, excite interest in the systematic review.
- The request for information itself, three weeks after the pre-notification, will usually include a partially completed data extraction form and a promise of acknowledgement or other appropriate incentive.
- The investigator will be followed up approximately five weeks after the request using any means available (e.g. telephone, email, fax, post).

We have surveyed Cochrane review groups to find out how reviewers currently approach investigators and have used these techniques to design two interventions to be compared in a randomised trial.

Eligibility and randomisation

Cochrane reviewers are eligible to participate in First Contact if they have at least one included study from which they wish to seek information from the original investigators. The reviewer should be uncertain as to the best way to make contact with the investigator, and should be uncertain as to whether our control or experimental intervention would be more effective. The reviewer may choose, before randomisation, whether correspondence will be electronic or by surface mail.

The reviewer will submit details of each investigator to our randomisation centre and will receive an allocated intervention.

Control intervention

The control intervention consists of a single, simple letter (or email) requesting missing information. This is similar to the approach currently used by many reviewers.

Experimental intervention

The experimental intervention consists of an intensive approach drawing from methods demonstrated to be effective in randomised trials within the field of population surveys.

Data collection and outcome measures
Details of all correspondence sent and received will be collected by the reviewer on our prepared Data Collection forms. The main outcome is retrieval of the missing information 12 weeks after the first correspondence, using a four point scale: no/unsatisfactory/satisfactory/perfect response. Secondary outcomes include time to response and cost of intervention.

Analysis

The analysis of First Contact will follow a Bayesian approach. During the later stages of the trial results will be available on the web site. The trial will stop when either reviewers cease to be uncertain about the best intervention, or our pre-specified degree of precision in the main result is reached.

What you gain from joining First Contact



By joining First Contact you will be contributing to the evidence base of methods for conducting systematic reviews. You will also be provided with an organised system for recording requests and responses from investigators you write to. All reviewers participating in First Contact, who wish to be listed, will be named in the primary publications concerning the trial.

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Help us determine how to maximise the potential of an included study in a Cochrane review

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