

Writing a case report for publication

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ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Research has become an integral part of all health care practitioners. Finding effective ways of sharing the valuable work that is being done in the clinical setting is essential. A case report is a form of communicating information to other health care practitioners regarding exceptional cases.

Aim:

This paper aims to describe the importance and role of case reports in the literature and summarise the guidelines for doing a case report.

Method:

A literature search was conducted in Pubmed and Medline using terms such as case reports, publishing, and guidelines to determine successful literature that highlights how to write a case report. Case reports will contribute to the body of evidence needed for professions and could stimulate debate around controversial issues. A summary of the relevant information needed to write a good case report for publication based on the literature is summarised in order to facilitate the process for new authors.

Conclusion:

Case reports if written in a scientific manner, can make a valuable contribution to research.

Key words: case reports, guidelines, health care practitioners

Background

Case reports have been a common feature in health literature. According to Cohen (2006), case studies can make a valuable contribution to research and education by providing essential

information for the optimal care of patients, even though they tend to be low on the hierarchy of evidence (Table 1). Readers of case studies are able to learn through identifying with the information provided about the patient and relate it to similar

Table 1: Hierarchy of evidence

Level	Type of evidence
Level 1	Meta-analysis of multiple controlled studies
Level 2	Experimental studies
Level 3	Quasi-experimental studies such as non-randomised, controlled single group pre-post test, cohort, time series, matched case-controlled studies
Level 4	Non-experimental studies e.g. comparative and correlational descriptive research, qualitative studies
Level 5	Program evaluation, case reports
Level 6	Expert opinions

cases. According to Aitken and Marshall (2007), case studies should contain a strong educational message which could include aspects such as “raising awareness of an issue, outlining a new condition, and clarifying different aspects of conditions”. The aim of this paper is to provide a guideline for writing case reports.

What is a Case Report?

A case report is the documentation of a unique, unusual, or newsworthy scientific observations for the purpose of education and research. Cases used in case reports should possess a notable deviation from the current clinical understanding and observations of health care professionals (Cohen, 2006). They should also strive to advance the general understanding of the disorder in question, improve clinical skills, and/or introduce suggested research. Authors of case studies should review the guidelines of the journal to which they plan to submit for specific requirements, including word limit, formatting of the text and references, and patient consent forms.

Why do a Case Report?

The use of the phrase “publish or perish” is becoming increasingly relevant to all academics but is also relevant to health care practitioners. In higher education, tertiary institutions in South Africa receive funding for published material and health care practitioners are able to share innovative management strategies through publication. Few health care practitioners in private practice will have the opportunity to be involved in clinical trials or do research on a large scale but writing a case report is possible for any health care practitioner (Pierson, 2004). Case reports can be used for educational purposes providing an enormous amount of clinical

information about a valuable lesson from practice; they can describe a diagnostic or therapeutic dilemma or present important information on an adverse reaction to a particular form of treatment (Iles & Piepho 1996; Cohen 2006) . In addition when health care professionals and clients differ in their understanding of what is right or wrong, an ethical dilemma may arise. Such dilemmas occur in everyday clinical practice and a case report may be an excellent manner for health care professionals to analyze these dilemmas and stimulate debate. Additionally, case reports can also suggest the need for a change in practice or clinical reasoning in terms of diagnosis or prognosis. If a patient has presented in clinical practice with an unusual or interesting disorder, it can be helpful to capture this in a case report.

The Steps in Writing a Case Report

According to Green and Johnson (2006), getting a case report published should not be difficult but the authors request that when writing a case report specific attention is paid to the different sections. The different sections are detailed below.

Ethical considerations:

If you feel you would like to write a case report, written and signed consent should be obtained initially from a patient or their guardian. Obtaining consent is mandatory for some journals, but if consent isn't mandatory, it is important to realise that this is a demonstration of good practice. If you decide to do a case study retrospectively i.e. once the patient has been discharged, it is advised to obtain the permission of the patient to use the information. Ensure the patient that confidentiality will be ensured and all of the information relating to the patient in the case report will be anonymised to prevent the patient's identity being revealed.

Table 2: Background information for a case report

No	Information needed
1	Identify a patient or case that is worth reporting
2	Search the literature for similar cases and their findings
3	Determine the educational message that you wish to convey
3	Obtain consent from the patient
4	Collect all relevant information form patient records regarding patient history, examinations requested and results

Preparing for the case report

A case report may be written retrospectively or prospectively. Both have their advantages and disadvantages but the usefulness of both types

of reports can be facilitated with careful planning. Once a suitable patient has been identified, there are certain steps to follow. A literature search, with a focussed research

Table 3: A suggested checklist for writing case reports (Cohen 2006; Green & Johnson 2006)

<p>Title: Find an appropriate title based on literature that should not be too long but is clear what the article is about</p>
<p>Abstract:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and objective • Case report • Discussion • Conclusion
<p>Introduction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefly describe the case and state the purpose of the case report • Describe whether the case is unique. If not, does the case have an unusual diagnosis, prognosis, therapy or harm? • Provide background information and justify the merit of the case by using the literature review • Describe the strategy of the literature review and search terms used • Introduce the case to the reader and describe how the case contributes to scientific knowledge. • Describes the instructive or teaching points that add value to this case. • Make the introduction concise and less than 3 paragraphs • How the case information impacts on care should be emphasised
<p>Description of the case</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the case in a narrative form • Describe the history, examination and investigations adequately. Is the cause of the patient's illness clear-cut? What are other plausible explanations? Provide patient demographics without providing patient identifiers. Describe the patients complaints. • Describe the treatments adequately. Have all available therapeutic options been considered? Are outcomes related to treatments? • Provide the patients events in a chronological order • Ensure the patient case presentation provides enough detail for the reader to establish the case's validity. • Ensure that the information is provided in a logical manner
<p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report a literature review of other similar cases. Describe how this case is different. Critique the outcome of the case presented effectively • Explain the rationale for reporting the case. What is unusual about the case? Does it challenge prevailing wisdom? • List the limitations of the case report and describe their relevance • In the future, could things be done differently in a similar case?
<p>Summary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarise the most important features of the case report • Justify the uniqueness of the case • Draw recommendations and conclusions • Ensure that the educational message is clearly integrated

question, should be carried out using suitable databases e.g. Medline, PubMed or Ebscohost or a search engine e.g. Google scholar. A summarised account should be written including a patient's history and initial presentation. The examination(s) and investigations that have been requested or already conducted (if appropriate) and their results (both negative and positive findings), treatment and management strategies undertaken and the outcome of treatment should also be reported. The patient's notes can be used to recall these details. Previous treatment and the outcome of any previous treatment should also be included. Table 2 summarises the background information for a case report.

What to include in a case report

Case reports should generally encompass the following five sections: an abstract, an introduction and objective with a literature review, a description of the case report, a discussion that relates the case to the evidence base, a summary of the case, and a conclusion (McCarthy and Reilly, 2000). Aitken and Marshall (2007) indicated that case reports should be "factual, concise and logically presented". Table 3 provides a checklist summarising the information that needs to be included under each section (Aitken & Marshall, 2007; Cohen, 2006; Brodell, 2000).

What to avoid when preparing a case report

Avoid lengthy lists of patient data, aim to be short with precise and relevant information. Do not attempt only to highlight the successes of the case report but mention the limitations and possible reasons for the limitations, as this will give you more credibility.

Limitations of a Case Report

According to Martyn (2002) and Green and Johnson (2006), there are limitations to writing case reports. The authors summarised the limitations of a case report to be difficult to control the confounding factors with each patient and thus making generalisability difficult. In addition, retrospective case reports are dependent on accurate patient documentation. If documents are not complete this introduces a source of error into the report.

Conclusion

Case reports make an essential contribution to research and if conducted in a systematic and thorough manner can be of value to clinicians and academics.

It is however, it is important to highlight the limitations of the case report that is being presented.

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