



Writing a case report: The opening challenge

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INTRODUCTION

Case reports are probably the oldest form of medical communication, and it has been observed that, since before Hippocrates, case reports have made a valuable contribution to medical science [1-3]. Sir William Osler encouraged other physicians to note, record, and publish the unusual or original observation [1,4,5]. Case reports are rapid means of dissemination of information vital to the practice and also serve as important educational tools to both authors and readers [6]. However, in recent days, this section of the journals is being contracted because of being more deviated to the experimental studies, and the diminutive effect of case reports on a journal's impact factor [7]. Now a days, general medical journals have few attention in publishing case reports and tradition is, the more eminent the journal, the fewer case reports it offers [8]. Another change is the journals publishing the subject wise case reports; then, the difficulties arise in publishing the interdisciplinary reports. Despite that case, reports have very important role in identifying very important diseases in the medical history [6]. It was aimed to describe the components of writing a case report with ensuring scientific novelty for the beginners.

WHAT TO REPORT

During the hesitation of preparing, the case report the most important issue is what is new, novel and contributory to the existing science and that can be ascertained properly after thorough literature review.

- Any new advancement in medical science [1,9]
- An unusual, rare, or unknown disorder [2,3,7,9]
- Unexpected or unusual presentations of a disease [3]
- New cause and effect presentation [1-3,9]
- New medical errors or medication errors [7,9]
- Rare or novel adverse drug reactions [1-3,7,9]

- Cases that illustrate a new principle or support or refute a current theory [1]
- Cases that present a therapeutic or diagnostic observation that elucidates a previously misunderstood clinical condition or response [1,9]
- Cases those teach humanistic lessons to the health-care professional [9].

WHO CAN WRITE A CASE REPORT

Case reports offer the best opportunities for medical students, residents, trainees, and practicing clinicians to gain experience in scientific writing and learn from their clinical seniors [4,6]. Case reports often serve as a clinician's first opportunity to be acquainted with scholarly writing and provide an important training ground in manuscript preparation and publication [7]. Case reports typically have several authors representing not only those who contributed to the clinical management of the case but also those who contributed to the writing and content of the report [6].

The Format

Many biomedical journals, those publish case reports, provide authors with guidelines that provide instruction for acceptance criteria, content, and format [3,9]. The format varies from journal to journal and publisher to publisher. BioMed Central follows CaRe guidelines format for case reporting, where many other publisher and journals are not following it [2,5]. Before preparing manuscript, it is better to go through the specific guideline of the specific journal. If there is any doubt, authors can contact the editorial staff of the considering journal to discuss the intentions before starting [4]. Case reports are generally 1500-2500 words in length with 20-30 references [6,7]. CaRe provided 13-item checklist

provides a framework to satisfy the need for completeness and transparency for publishing the case reports [5,10]. Regarding section in the report, most recommendations to make the article into five sections: (1) Abstract, (2) introduction/background, (3) case history/description, (4) discussion, and (5) conclusions/recommendations with few before and after topics such as title, acknowledgement, references, tables, figures, and captions [1-3,6,7,9].

Title

The title of the case report should be accurate, brief, clear, catchy, and succinct enough to interest the reader [2,7,9]. According to some authors, redundant words such as “case report” or “review of” should not be used in title [1,2], whereas others recommend to use “case report” as a must basis [3,5]. To me, it is better to deal the issue pragmatically based on the situation and authors’ choice.

Cover letter

Some authors recommend cover letter a selling pitch of the manuscript by articulating the salient educational message [4]. Brevity and clarity are essential assets if a submission is to meet the journal’s space requirements and retain the reader’s interest [4].

Abstract

Abstract mostly depends on the targeted journal. Some journals prefer structured abstract; some prefer unstructured abstract with specific word limit, and some journals do not allow abstracts for case reports [2]. The abstract is very brief (100-250 words) and should briefly summarize the case and its clinical relevance. The abstract should “short and sweet,” and it clearly state the subject and educational value of the case report to introduce the audience to the central theme of the article [3,6,9]. The abstract may be written by dividing into three or four sections in a succinct form, having introduction and objective, case presentation, discussion, and conclusion [3,9].

Key Words

It depends on the journal style, which may allow up to 10 indexing words with the usual range 3-5 words. Some journals used a fixed word as “case report” [2,5].

Introduction

The introduction or background serves the important role and also serves as the sales pitch for the rest of the manuscript [2,3,6]. The introduction section should be concise and salient and immediately attract the attention and interest of the reader [9]. The introduction should provide the subject, purpose, rationale, and merit of the case report [2,9]. It should present background information that provides clarity to the subject of discussion followed by an explanation of why the case report is novel [9]. A focused comprehensive literature review that corroborates

the author’s claims should accompany the introduction with the citations cited chronologically [9].

Case Presentation

The case presentation is a chronological description of the case history, examination, diagnostic testing, progress, treatment, and outcome [2,3,6,9]. The case presentation should begin with the chief complaints, initial presentation, medical history, and family and social history. Instead of exhaustive descriptions of clinical observations, authors should focus on those observations related to the central finding or theme of the report [6]. Authors also must be careful, however, to present sufficient information to support their conclusions [6,9]. This section may include tables that present both measured values and the normal ranges of serological or diagnostic tests as well as figures that aid in the explanation of clinical findings. Authors should then guide the reader through clinical reasoning, diagnostic testing, clinical developments, treatment, and outcome. Patient demographics such as age, height, weight, sex, race, and occupation must be included [3]. To limit the possibility of identifying the patient, the patient’s initials, date of birth, and other identifiers must not be used [3].

Discussion

The discussion section is the most important section of a case report as the authors state the significance of the information [1,9]. The discussion should evaluate the patient case for accuracy, validity, and uniqueness [1,9]. It reviews the evidence supporting clinical decisions, compares and contrasts the particular case with similar cases in common clinical practice, and describes the central theme, finding, or lesson of the case [6]. The authors can give explanations regarding why the case is different and may also discuss the limitations of their report and the implications for generalizing their findings to larger patient populations [6]. At this section, it is better to incorporate explanations of the diseases behavior on scientific basis as well as any new insight regarding the case is welcomed to be mentioned in this section.

Conclusions/Recommendations Section

This section includes a brief conclusion, the take home message, and lessons learned from the report [1]. It should focus on what has been learned, should relate to the purpose of the paper, and should not offer far reaching, unsupported, or general statements [7].

Authorship

Authorship status should be restricted to those who have made substantial, intellectual contributions to the report. Determining who will be listed as authors on a case report, and in what order, is an important process [7]. This may include clinicians who participated in patient diagnosis and management sufficiently to take public responsibility, as long as they also contributed to the manuscript’s writing

and review; some journals restrict the number of authors for case reports [2,3,11]. Some publishers fixed the criteria to qualify as an author as one should: (1) Have made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (2) have been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (3) have given final approval of the version to be published [3]. Whereas fund collection, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, alone, does not justify authorship [3]. It is convention that the author who does the most work on the report is listed first and only those involved in a substantive way are listed as authors. Past abuses in authorship have created a need for clear authorship criteria, which have been provided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors [7]. The novice author ideally should be the “corresponding author,” the author responsible for submission [11].

List of Abbreviations

When abbreviations are used in the text, they should be defined in the text at first use, as well as a list of abbreviations can be provided [3].

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Authors should acknowledge anyone who assisted them in the preparation of the manuscript but who does not meet the three criteria necessary to be named as an author [3,7]. Such a person may be a proofreader, a research assistant, source of funding, a department chair who provided only general support, a medical writer, or a person who has provided ideas for the manuscript [3,7]. Many journals do not permit acknowledgments for case reports [2]. Authors should obtain permission to acknowledge from all those mentioned in the section [2,3,7].

References

References should be drawn primarily from peer-reviewed journal articles, and authors should use the most recent references possible preferably within the preceding five years, unless the history of scholarship in a topic area is being discussed [2,3,7]. References should be limited to those directly relevant to the case; in general, not more than 10-15 [1,2,3]. References should be formatted according to the journal's instructions [2].

Tables

Tables can be used for large amounts of data that could not be conveyed clearly and succinctly in sentences. Authors should not reiterate in sentences the data shown in a table, as the point of creating a table is to eliminate that type of sentence from the text. Tables should be simple and self-contained, needing no further explanation. Some journals limit case reports to a finite number of tables [3].

Figures

Figures, graphs, photographs, or illustrations can make articles interesting to read and help greatly to describe clinical procedures or findings. However, captions for each figure used in the manuscript should be provided [3,6].

Ethics

Ethical issues that arise from writing a case report are basically two-fold: Informed consent and confidentiality [12]. It is essential to obtain written consent from the patient or the patient's legal guardians if appropriate to submit the case report with proper de-identification of the patient's identity [3,4,12].

CONCLUSION

Case reports are one of the oldest forms of medical communications, and usually, scientific writing starts with it. This article will pave the way of medical case reporting more comfortable for the beginners.

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