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RCP insight

How to write a clinical case report

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This guide is intended for medical student and foundation trainees.

What is a case report?

A case report is a means of communicating something new that has been learnt from clinical practice. It could be about an unusual or previously unknown condition, a rare presentation or complication of a known disease, or even a new approach to managing a common condition.

Case reports are the first-line of evidence in the medical literature, and provide medical students and junior doctors with a great opportunity to develop their writing skills. Getting a case report published will certainly look impressive on any CV.

Where do I find a case?

Always keep an eye out for unusual cases you encounter on the wards. If you do come across something interesting, discuss it with your consultant first. He or she will have a much better idea of what is novel or striking about a particular patient. Alternatively many consultants have stacks of unpublished material, and are just waiting for an enthusiastic junior to help them write it.

How do I get started?

It is always good practice to seek permission from the consultant in charge of the patient's care before writing your report. This will also help ensure that no one else starts writing up the same case! Obtaining patient consent is also very important. This is now a prerequisite for most journals, with many having their own specific patient consent form that you will need to download and complete. In the rare cases where your patient has passed away, it is important to contact the next-of-kin for consent before writing the case report.

Do a literature search

This is the single most important step. If you get this wrong, and your findings have already been reported, you will almost certainly struggle to publish your article. Make sure you perform a thorough literature search: use PubMed, Medline, Ovid, Embase and Google Scholar to ensure you find most of the articles out there. Don't forget to also look at popular case report journals that are not indexed in PubMed eg *International Medical Case Reports Journal*. Previously published case reports will also improve your understanding of the topic, and give you ideas for a unique message for your case report. By reading the literature, you may be able to educate your consultant with the latest evidence!

Collate the information

Once you've done your background reading, use the patient's notes to record the key points from the history, examination findings, relevant investigations, treatments (including operative findings) and outcomes. Make sure you remove all patient information – radiological images can be anonymised on PACS prior to copying them into your article. Ensure you save any patient data on a password-protected hospital computer, or an encrypted USB stick which many hospital IT departments can provide.

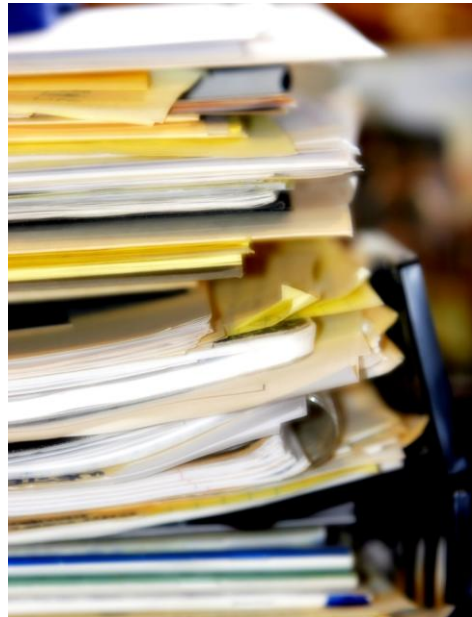
Choose a journal

This can be tricky! Many established journals do not publish case reports (or only in rare circumstances), so make sure you read the authorship guidelines carefully before you submit. Although publishing in a PubMed-indexed journal may increase readership, this may not always be possible. You also need to think about cost. Once your manuscript has been accepted, the publication fees can be quite expensive. It is always worth asking your postgraduate education

department, or university department, if they have an institutional subscription to any case report journals.

How do I write it up?

Although word limits can vary between journals, most case reports are not particularly long. It is best to write the actual report in one stretch if possible, including as much detail as you think is relevant. You can always edit the discussion and trim down the article at a later stage. Below is the general format adopted for most case reports.



Introduction

Summarise your case report in a sentence. Mention how rare this condition is, and why your case report is important eg as a differential to consider in a patient presenting with X, Y and Z.

Case report

Narrate your case in a way that is easy and enjoyable to follow. The general approach is to describe the history, examination findings, investigations and treatment in that order, without the headings. Avoid any unnecessary details, and only mention the important positive and negative findings from each part of the clinical assessment. Try and include one or two images to keep the reader engaged.

Discussion

This is the selling point of your case report, as a well-written argument will convince a journal that your case report is worthy of publication. Start by briefly expanding on your introduction, explaining why your particular case is important, and of interest to the reader.

Next, sum up the current literature related to your case. Describe what has already been reported about your topic, and what the main hypotheses and theories are that explain the clinical findings. Remember that reviewers will be looking for evidence that your case is rare.

Finally, describe in detail the message that you are conveying through your report. This may be in line with current thinking, or even contrary to popular belief! Focus on the lessons that should be learnt from your experience, and how this affects future clinical practice.

Summary points

Some journals will ask for a brief conclusion, or summary of learning points. You should succinctly summarise the key messages of your case report in three or four bullet points.

Abstract and references

It is often easier to write the abstract once you have completed the main body of text. Abstracts should generally be around 150-250 words, and summarise the case presentation and messages of the report.

References should be listed in the style requested by the journal (eg Vancouver, Harvard, etc). As a rule of thumb, most case reports will not need more than ten references, so make sure you keep them relevant.

Submitting your case report

Once you have written your first draft, check the spelling and grammar. Give it to your consultant to proof-read, and then make any final revisions and a covering letter to accompany the article. In reality, most case reports will require at least one or two revisions after submission to a journal. In the event that your case report is rejected outright, don't worry, there are always other journals you can submit to! Always read the reviewers' comments, many of whom may be experts in the field, and revise your article carefully.

Be aware that you cannot submit your article to a second journal, whilst awaiting a decision from the first.



Some hints and tips

Only list the names of those who have contributed to the report in the authorship. Case reports are generally not very difficult to write, and apart from yourself and your consultant, need not include a very long list of authors. You should discuss the authorship with your consultant before submitting your case report.

Publishing case reports can be difficult, especially when there is an ever-growing body of literature. Ensuring you do your homework on the topic will save you time making countless revisions after submission. Don't be disheartened if your case report is rejected, persistence often pays off!

Once your case report has been accepted, you can celebrate. But remember to keep your eye out for the next interesting case...

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Acronyms

PACS icture rchiving and ommunications ystem