

EDITORIAL

Surgical Case Reports Editorial

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Case reports are the building blocks of medical literature. It is the starting point for scientific or medical writing for most of us in medical schools.

Role of case reports in the medical literature

Case reports appeared to contribute little to medical science, and we often use the phrase 'anecdotally' to reflect the significance of case reports. The importance of case reports cannot be underestimated. In these days of internet access, typing a key phrase on a patient's issues will immediately generate invaluable information on the screen. Many articles will appear that range from case reports to controversies, clinical trials to therapeutics.

The popularity of case reports is attested to the many journals dedicated to case reports alone, such as the *Journal of surgical case reports* and *Journal of medical case reports*. Even high impact factor journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* routinely provide a section based on the case record of the Massachusetts General Hospital, to generate discussion and learning points. It has been reported that the number of new peer-reviewed journals that focus on case reports had increased to more than 160 produced by 78 publishers by mid-2015 (1).

An experience of a single case is anecdotal no doubt. As more cases grow, it becomes a case series. That too helps little to render much significance in medical science because a case series describes a clinical pattern, an observation or a result of some intervention and it might not represent the whole spectrum. From then on, it may grow to be a large cohort, accumulated by a team of clinicians, over months or years. As the numbers grow, so will the significance of the experience. That series will be large enough to contribute to the advancement of science because it describes some larger experiences that may be more reliable.

Others may dispute the relevance of that experience. They may have a differing or opposite view, either in epidemiology, presentation, pathogenesis or management. In terms of intervention and treatment, the only way to settle the dispute or differences is through a double-blind randomized controlled trial.

In the era of evidence-based medicine, the highest levels of evidence in intervention and treatment are based on a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. Randomized-controlled trials are well planned, well-thought-out trials, diligently executed, usually carried out in many centres and participated by many clinicians. Such trials minimize the elements of chance and allow us to judge that a treatment is indeed effective based on science.

Just as a seed will grow into a forest, so will a case report, which progresses to a cohort and in some instances to a trial that determines practice.

Importance of case reports

Having said that, case reports should not be underrated. It forms a basis of medical communications for medical students and clinicians. Through case reports, medical students and practitioners learn the art of communication. Ability to craft a good case report will inevitably improve the medical documentation. They learn that case reports must be clear and concise, and the reports are written in logically organized sequences. It also teaches brevity and precise language and the art of emphasizing a particular aspect of science that illustrates the learning point. More importantly, they referenced to work of others who had reported on their experiences.

Case reports are still relevant when it comes to dealing with rare cases, infrequent presentations, unexpected encounters during treatment, a new understanding of pathogenesis and unconventional treatment of a patient. The rare cases will add to the collective experience of medical practitioners worldwide. When these cases are analyzed as a whole, a pattern may emerge that better describes the disease.

Infrequent presentations will give an insight into those, diseases that present in an unusual manner and do not fit into standard textbook descriptions. If these case presentations are reported more frequently, they can be added to a differential diagnosis of an illness. Most authors and editors of medical text obtain their resources

from published journals.

Unconventional treatment, when reported, may change the course of the management of patients. One of the great advances in the treatment of abdominal aortic aneurysm stems from the endovascular aneurysm repair, in a case report from Argentina (2). Once that approach is deemed safe and feasible, it grew into case series and then resulted in randomized controlled trials that attested to its efficacy and safety (3). It then becomes standard practice.

Publishing case reports

For those newly inducted into medical writing, getting a suitable journal to publish their case report is often daunting. Due to a large number of contributors and space limits, global conventional journals in the higher tiers, do not readily accept case reports. In their place, many open access journals have sprung up, some dedicated to case reports alone.

Open access journal provides freely available and unrestricted use of research and scholarship, which many researchers prefer as an efficient means to disseminate science in the digital world (4). However, many open access journals typically charge a fee for publication. The open-access model usually requires authors to pay submission and publication fees upon acceptance, typically between US \$300 and \$1200 (5). With the mushrooming of open access publications, some unscrupulous publishers took the opportunity to deceive young researchers who are eager to see their work in print. They would publish anything for a fee, without going through the rigorous process of peer review and ensuring quality. The term “predatory open access publishing” has been coined to describe these unethical exploitations of researchers (6).

It is with these in mind that the department of surgery had requested a slot to publish the many interesting case reports. In this special edition dedicated to case reports, you will find reports of some rare diseases, unusual presentations, uncommon treatments and unexpected courses of illnesses.

This building block, while in its rudimentary form, contributes to the advancement of science in its way.

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