Clinical Case Report Writing

Case Reports are the first-line of evidence in medical literature and are a vehicle for communicating something new or significant that has been learnt through clinical practice. This may be something about an unusual presentation of a condition, a complication or combination of presenting conditions, or a novel approach to the treatment of a condition. In Holistic health care individualised approaches to the management of clients can offer significant information for consideration by fellow practitioners.

For students and practitioners of natural health clinical case report writing provides a good opportunity to develop professional writing skills and to consider submitting their case reports for publication in relevant professional journals. A good clinical case report is one that contains a clear message and is relevant and of benefit to fellow practitioners.

Getting Started

Finding a suitable case

Your first consideration should be cases that you have dealt with in your clinical practicum studies to date, either as a primary or secondary student practitioner. If you wish to write a report on a case where you were the secondary student practitioner it is advisable, where possible, to gain permission from the primary student practitioner responsible for the client’s care in the event they may also be considering writing a report on that same case.

If there are no cases that you have dealt with in your clinical practicum studies to date which you feel are appropriate for writing a case report (liaise with your Clinic Supervisor on this) then you may request permission from your Clinic Supervisor to search archive files for a suitable case (permission from the primary student practitioner for any case that you find should be obtained where possible).

Features of a suitable case

Look for cases that are unusual or stand out. What is it about a case that would make it interesting to a fellow practitioner or student? A journal is more likely to publish a case report that has one or more of the following features:

- A novel or original approach to treatment
- A side effect (positive or negative) or an adverse response to a treatment
- Unusual observations of a case
- An unusual combination of conditions resulting in complexity
- Proposal of a new perspective or theory regarding a condition or treatment plan

Conduct a literature search

Especially if you are considering submission of your case for publication, it is wise to conduct a search of current literature to determine what information already exists that’s relevant to the features of your proposed case. If something identical to what you’re proposing has already been published it’s unlikely that your submission for publication will be successful.

Identification of previously published cases similar to your proposal may enhance your understanding of the topic and provide ideas for a fresh or unique perspective/message for your case report.
Client confidentiality and consent

In keeping with Australian Privacy and Confidentiality law, personal details as well as any information that may identify a client must be strictly protected and not included in case reports. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity care must be taken that any photographs of affected areas will not reveal a client’s identity.

If a case report is to be submitted for consideration for publication then it is essential that written consent is provided by the client beforehand. If the client is a minor, parental or guardian consent is essential. Where an adult client is unable to consent, the consent of an immediate family member is required.

Collating information

Once a suitable case has been identified, extract from the client file notes key points or information that will be relevant to writing your case report (e.g. history, physical examination findings, relevant pathology test findings, treatments, outcomes). From this data determine the main message you wish to communicate via your case report.

Structuring your Case Report

Most case reports are not very long. Aim for between 1000 and 1500 words depending on the nature and complexity of the case. Once you have a draft you can edit and trim the article as necessary.

While different journals have slightly different formats and word counts for case reports, generally all case reports follow a similar format.

Abstract

The abstract summarises the case, the problem or topic it addresses, and the message that the case report conveys. It must be very concise, usually not more than 150 words. The abstract is usually written after the sections that follow it are completed.

Introduction

The introduction provides a brief overview of the problem that the case addresses, citing relevant literature where it exists. An introduction usually concludes with a very brief description of the client and the basic condition concerned.

Case Report

In this section details of the case are provided. These details should be narrated in a way that is easy and enjoyable to follow and usually include:

- Client description
- Client history
- Relevant physical examination result
- Relevant pathology results or other investigations
- Treatment strategy
- Treatment outcome

Be sure to include only essential pertinent details. Unnecessary details should be excluded. If photographic images are appropriate, this is where they can be included in the report.
Discussion

The discussion section is the most important part of the case report. It’s where you emphasise the real point or message of your report.

Expand on your introduction, providing an explanation to readers of why your case is important or significant. Then sum up any current literature of relevance to your topic, describing existing theories or findings and the relationship of your case to those existing findings. Your case report should be connected to the existing findings/theories. It may corroborate, detract or offer a new perspective on existing findings/theories or approaches to treatment. This is the real point of your case report that needs to be emphasised to readers.

Conclusion/Summary

End your report with a concise conclusion or summary where you provide the readers with the key points covered by your case. Recommendations may be included of how your message may be utilised in clinical practice.

References

Provide specifically relevant references to your case report. No more than ten references are necessary and the key point is specific relevance to your case. The references listed should be only the in-text citations from your report.