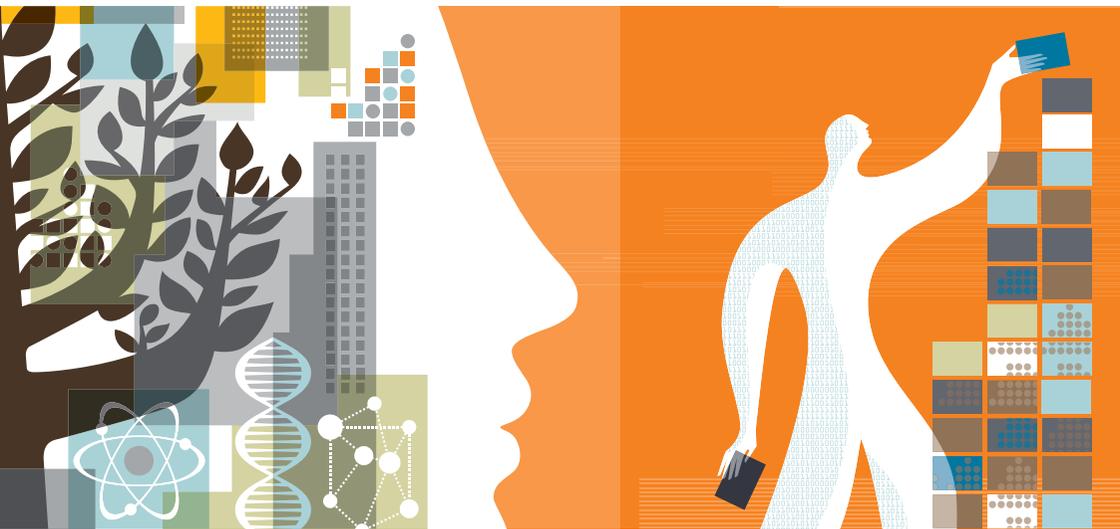


Publishing Campus

Stating your case: A seven point checklist for writing your case report



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A case report is the description of clinical observations in a single patient (or sometimes a small series of related or similar cases). Case reports had and have an important role in clinical medicine in general, and in the field of infectious diseases (Kurzai and Gow, 2012). They provide a valuable source of information, especially for rare and unusual infections which have no available guidelines or standard textbook approaches to management. Case reports teach doctors how fellow practitioners have acted in comparable and perhaps difficult-to-decide situations. Therefore doctors should be encouraged to summarize their experiences in case reports.

To help with this - here are some guidelines for the creation and publishing of case reports.

1. If you have an interesting case, write it up and publish

The important first step is: Take the time to write up and publish your interesting case! There are several advantages to this:

- Your case report will aid in the decision making process of a colleague who is perhaps faced with a similar patient.
- Your case report might contribute to, and form the basis of, important clinical developments, e.g. the discovery of a potential novel clinical entity in allergic diseases related to fungi (Singh et al., 2012).
- Your case report can be an important first step to stimulating discussion about treatment methods of particular patients.

2. The patient is your partner – consent is required

A case report is the thorough description of an individual patient's clinical course; therefore, it will always contain information that could potentially be traced back to the patient. This is the reason that informed consent is required for publication of a case report. Frequently, the authors are convinced that their case report is "anonymized" and does not present "any information that could be used for identification". This is almost always never the case.

Kleinert and Wagner (2012) from COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) have stated that *"for all case reports, small case series, and images of people, editors should require the authors to have obtained explicit consent for publication (which is different from consent to take part in research). This consent should inform participants which journal the work will be published in, make it clear that, although all efforts will be made to remove unnecessary identifiers, complete anonymity is not possible, and ideally state that the person described has seen and agreed with the submitted paper. There may be exceptions where it is not possible to obtain consent, for example when the person has died. In such cases, a careful consideration about possible harm is needed and out of courtesy attempts should be made to obtain assent from relatives."*

These guidelines should be taken seriously, and it is mandatory that informed consent prior to publication is documented. This is the obligation of the author. In many cases patients will be very willing to agree when taking into account that this may help other patients who experience similar manifestations of disease.

Can there be exceptions to this? According to Kleinert and Wagner *"In very rare cases, an **important public health message** may justify publication without consent if it is not possible despite all efforts to obtain consent and the benefit of publication outweighs the possible harm."* However, this clearly is a rare exemption. For a standard case report, the advice is to see your patient as a partner and ask for written informed consent!

3. Select a journal specializing in case reports

Before the advent of online publishing and the founding of new journals focusing on case reports, publishing single case observations was a difficult task. Case reports are often not as well cited as other published items. I would argue that case reports are most valuable if they are part of a repository of many related cases accessible by good searching tools. Therefore, from a user's point of view, specialized case report journals fulfilling this criterion seem an optimal choice. Clearly this will also make the reviewing process easier as rejection solely due to the fact that a case report is a case report will not occur. Therefore – whenever possible – go for specialized case report journals! Publishing here will ensure that your work is read by all the right people.

4. Use a timeline to guide the reader

To make a case report intuitive, it is of paramount importance that the clinical course of the case is evident. When preparing your report, you should draft the timeline and sort all important events according to it. For example, when publishing your case in *MMCR* you are required to define a “day 0” (e.g. day of hospital admission, day of first symptom) and give all other dates in reference to this fixed point (e.g. blood cultures were taken at day +5, intervention xy was performed at day +10, history of the patient included bacteremia with *Staphylococcus epidermidis* at day -15). For readers that try to deduce information on how your specific case has been handled, the timeline is crucial.

5. A picture is worth a thousand words – show important findings as images

Everyone knows that a picture is worth a thousand words and this is probably not exaggerated for many case reports. Online case report journals like *MMCR* offer the option to include an unlimited number of (colored) pictures at no cost. Important pictures can include photographs of lesions, radiographies, results of functional tests, histopathology and many more. You as an author should select the most important ones and add them to your case report. Other technical advances that are very useful to a reader are the [Virtual Microscope](#) and the integration of movies into case reports. Use these unique opportunities to make your case clearer for the reader.

6. Include a rationale for your decisions

Managing complex and difficult clinical cases will always mean making decisions. Sometimes these decisions are based on external information like guidelines (or other case reports), and sometimes they are based on the knowledge and personal experience of the treating physician. Retrospectively, these decisions may not turn out to be optimal or sometimes they are even wrong. Case reports are especially helpful in these very situations. However, to allow future readers to do better than you (if at all possible), you have to clearly state your rationale. This expert decision process description is an integral part of a case report.

7. Discuss your case – know the literature

A case report is short. It is not designed to be a lengthy review of all available information. However, for putting together a high quality case report, it is mandatory to thoroughly search available literature for published cases of similar diseases or for clinical studies related to the case. This information should be presented in the discussion. Items like tables summarizing related cases can be extraordinarily helpful and greatly improve the quality of a case report. However, this should not be mixed up with the old “case report and literature review” strategy, which is, to publish case reports as reviews and reduce the presented case to a short teaser for a literature review. Restrict your report to the important information but take the time to acquaint yourself with the literature.