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A CASE FOR CASE REPORTS

Saba Sohail

Since the evidence-based medicine has become the order of the day, clinicians have come to rely more and more on the available literature while facing a clinical challenge. In Pakistan where majority of hospitals are not equipped with a computerized archival system of clinical records, case reports still remain an important published source of proven results and follow up in a particularly novel case.

Although the defining boundaries are rather fluid, 'case report' is the term usually applied to a communication of an uncommon interesting clinical condition seen in a single or couple of cases usually upto five cases. These case reports are an example of a short primary scientific communication based on observation and follow up with or without intervention as demanded by the clinical situation. Although not as highly regarded as hypothesis based – research articles and often accused of not being evidence-based,¹ these pieces of observation have provided some very valuable hints. An example is the case report of twin sisters by Thornton *et al.* one with and the other without eclampsia which nullified the previous concept of genetic basis of eclampsia, at a time when genetic deciphering was neither so advanced nor in vogue. The series of case reports which described the occurrence of Kaposi's sarcoma led to the realization of a new immune deficiency syndrome and finally the isolation of the causative agent, the HIV. Most recent example is the case reports alerting to the onslaught caused by Corona virus induced SARS.

Apart from these high profile reports, there is another variety of region and locality specific case reports, which herald, for example the cross border spread of infections. An instance is the *Arbovirus* infections, which were practically unknown in Pakistan till the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Then there are case reports, which may even communicate clinical diagnostic, technical and management errors which have a potential to go unrecognized unless known. The mind after all sees only what it knows. Objectively handled and described case reports are an important means of developing cognition skills at all levels.² Moreover, these usually provide the first practice of the novice and the aspiring young medical writer. However, the recognition of these pieces of undoubted scientific and educational value remains dismal at least in Pakistan.

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Since 1997, the credit status awarding of case report is valued at nil by the august body that is PMDC, while a compilation of ten similar case reports – christened an evidence-based report is given the same value as an original research paper. A 'letter to editor' is given a one-tenth credit point. It is logical to assume that this last crediting applies to a letter containing scientific information rather than a comment on a published article. But this leaves a seriously large void. Moreover, there is no guideline about the archival format of an evidence-based report in terms of structure, word count and subsections.

JCPSP is probably the only journal that has given an idea about the structure of this type of manuscript³ and has started entertaining and publishing articles under this heading.

However, the contribution of a case report cannot be underestimated. These remain an important section of a biomedical journal and their educational and evidence-based guidance value cannot be denied. JCPSP takes pride to let secondary abstracting services of the West quote some of very novel case reports published in these very pages.

With nascence of medical universities and the emphasis placed on accredited published research work by an academician, recognition has become integrally linked with a number of research publications. Sadly, the incidence of research duplication and salami publications is on the rise as well. This deplorable trend is a worldwide phenomenon.⁴ Recently, a prestigious Pakistani journal has taken an important and commendable initiative of blacklisting one such offender and notifying it to all the contemporary medical journals. Although this sentence should discourage the other wrong doers, it is high time to encourage and recognize the importance of individual case reports. Due crediting to individual case report should act as a stimulant and appraisal of this high individual and original contribution to biomedical literature.

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