



Evaluation of a journal club designed to enhance the professional development of radiation therapists

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Abstract Journal clubs have traditionally been identified in the medical literature as an educational strategy aimed at keeping staff abreast of professional literature and encouraging critical appraisal of this literature. The ultimate goal is to encourage both reflection on clinical practice and an evidence-based approach to professional practice. Based on these goals a journal club was implemented at the Radiation Oncology Network's Westmead Campus designed to create a supportive environment in which to discuss current and authoritative literature. The journal club was implemented mainly for the radiation therapists however all members of the radiation oncology team were invited to attend. The journal club meetings were held monthly and repeated once to accommodate as many staff as possible. The journal club's structure and whether it had achieved its goals was evaluated by the participants nine months after its implementation. This paper outlines the structure of the journal club and discusses the evaluation of the first nine months.

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Introduction

Radiation therapy is a profession with continually evolving technology and patient care needs, requiring radiation therapists to ensure that their professional knowledge and skills are constantly updated. One method of ensuring that this professional development is occurring is by using current and authoritative literature to keep abreast of changes and to evaluate their impact on clinical practice.

The formation of a journal club is an educational strategy that can assist radiation therapists to keep up to date and evaluate current professional research. The implementation of a journal club in a radiation therapy department also has the potential to facilitate more rigorous research-based clinical practice.¹

In January 2004 a journal club was introduced at the Westmead Campus of the Radiation Oncology Network. This network encompasses the radiation oncology departments at Westmead Hospital (Westmead Campus) and Nepean Hospital (Nepean Campus) in Sydney, Australia.

The journal club was aimed primarily at radiation therapists but medical physicists, nursing and medical staff

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were also encouraged to attend. It was anticipated that broader participation would increase the diversity of discussion and increase the variety of ideas exchanged.² The journal club was introduced as a means of keeping participants informed of developments within their profession.³ It was also designed to encourage participants to read and discuss current literature, thus encouraging them to integrate their clinical experiences with current research and assist in bridging the gap between research and clinical practice.⁴ After it had been in existence for nine months the journal club was evaluated, using a questionnaire.

Background

Journal club goals

There is little in the medical radiation sciences literature on the use of journal clubs. However, journal clubs have been used by the medical profession for a number of years⁵ as a teaching and learning strategy for medical staff. Common journal club goals include keeping up to date with current literature,^{2,5} encouraging development of the skills needed to critically appraise the literature³⁻⁶ and making clinical practice changes based on current research.^{4,7,8}

The design and implementation of the journal club at the Westmead Campus of the Radiation Oncology Network were carried out with these goals in mind. Thus the journal club was also designed to encourage members to reflect on clinical practice, as one method of encouraging an evidence-based approach to their professional practice. An evidence-based practice approach to clinical practice requires practitioners to use their professional judgment and reasoning skills.⁹

Prior to the commencement of the journal club, five goals were identified by the researchers to assist in the evaluation of the journal club. These goals were:

1. Increasing participants' confidence in reading current and authoritative literature
2. Increasing participants' motivation to read current and authoritative literature
3. Updating participants' professional knowledge
4. Increasing participants' critical thinking skills
5. Encouraging participants to reflect on and, where appropriate, change, their professional practice, based on their knowledge of current and authoritative literature

Structure of the journal club

It was important to consider the characteristics of adult learners, as identified in educational research, when designing the structure of the journal club. Adult learning is an internal and personal process.¹⁰ One of its defining characteristics is that "they [adult learners] are more deeply motivated to learn those things they see the need to learn".^{10, p. 21} It follows then that participation should always be voluntary. Adult learning is also experience-based,¹¹ in that there is meaning attached to learning gained from experience. Educational activities may be

informal in nature, participant-centred, highly interactive,¹² and often collaborative.¹¹

The journal club was facilitated over a nine-month period on a monthly basis. The monthly sessions were held at 11 am and 2 pm on separate days, to give all departmental staff including part-timers the opportunity to attend. The journal club was held during normal working hours, outside the usual staff break time. Each session lasted for one hour and included the review of one article. The one hour time-frame was strictly adhered to, to ensure minimal disruption to the general running of the department. The journal club was held in the staff tearoom so as to create an informal atmosphere that encouraged and promoted review and discussion.⁸ Participants were seated around a table to maximise interaction.³

Participants were encouraged to assess their own learning needs and set their own learning goals in relation to the journal club. In keeping with the voluntary nature of the club, members selected the meetings they wished to attend and the level to which they participated.

The department's radiation therapist educator was responsible for coordinating the journal club. Radiation therapy educator is a non-clinical position which entails coordinating all educational activities for radiation therapy staff and students. The radiation therapist educator was also initially responsible for facilitating the journal club and selecting the articles. However, to incorporate adult education principles the facilitation of the journal club and selection of articles rotated among the coordinator and the participants as time progressed.

A number of criteria were used when selecting articles. The first was relevance to radiation therapy clinical practice. The second was local authorship. The reason for this was to demonstrate the research being undertaken in Australia. It was hoped that this would encourage participants to reflect on their own clinical experiences and research undertakings. However, following the journal club evaluation, articles by international authors were also included, to allow comparison and contrast of Australian and international practice.

The third criterion was that the articles selected should introduce new concepts or ideas compared to current practice. Many of the articles related to issues in which individual participants had expressed a particular interest. The articles were categorised into the themes of radiation therapy, education, and patient care. These three themes were deliberately designed to be broad, to ensure that a variety of articles would be included for discussion. The themes were alternated over the nine-month period in an attempt to cater for a range of interests.

Each article was reproduced and distributed at the end of the previous session, to give participants time to review it and come prepared to discuss it the following month. The paragraphs in the selected articles were numbered so that they could be easily referred to during the journal club discussion. Each article also included a copy of relevant pages from the front and back of the journal, with details such as the journal's editorial committee.

One of the features of many of the journal clubs discussed in the literature is the use of a "checklist" or "reading guide",^{2,13,14} which assists participants in critically evaluating the article under discussion. The reading guide used in

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