

UPDATE IN RADIOLOGY

The clinical case: Validity, values and strategies to approach its writing[☆]



J.M. Mellado^{a,*}, C.D. Packer^b

^a Sección de Radiología Ambulatoria, Servicio de Radiología, Hospital Universitario Miguel Servet, Zaragoza, Spain

^b Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, Cleveland, OH, USA

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Abstract The case report is used to communicate the experience acquired by its authors with a patient. Although its relevance has been doubted, the case report deserves to be vindicated and contextualized. We review the case report's historical tradition, recent evolution and current formats. We describe its utility as a scientific tool, a continuing education resource and an aid to diagnosis. We reflect on the teaching potential its writing entails. Finally, we provide strategies to address the writing of a radiological case report.

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El caso clínico: vigencia, valores y estrategias para abordar su escritura

Resumen El caso clínico sirve para dar a conocer la experiencia adquirida por sus autores con un enfermo. Aunque se ha cuestionado su relevancia, el caso clínico merece ser reivindicado y contextualizado. Revisamos la tradición histórica, la evolución reciente y los formatos actuales del caso clínico. Describimos su vigencia y valor como instrumento científico, divulgativo y asistencial. Reflexionamos sobre el potencial formativo que su escritura entraña. Finalmente, aportamos estrategias para abordar la escritura de un caso clínico de interés radiológico.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jmellado@comz.org (J.M. Mellado).

Introduction

The goal of publishing a clinical case is to disclose the experience acquired by its authors after managing a patient. It aims at spreading knowledge and formulating hypotheses from particular observations.^{1,2} Unfortunately, many interesting cases do not see the light of day. Training physicians usually do not have too much time to write clinical cases. Maybe they do not like writing, or have a mentor to guide them through the whole process. Or maybe they do not understand how important it is to give it a try. In the meantime, the most prestigious specialists do not usually write clinical cases and focus on more profound issues.

Although the clinical case has been alive for centuries, its actual relevance has been put into question. Some journals even ignore it or relegate it. Various authors wonder if it is something more than just an anecdote,³ like some sort of *zebra hunt*,⁴ or some curious anachronism⁵ barely compatible with actual evidence.⁵ Several books^{1,2} and papers³⁻¹⁵ have analyzed the merits of the clinical case and the keys of how to write it. The medical literature shows that the clinical case is still alive and vindicates its validity.

The clinical case is modest but still essential. It is not in the same level as the scientific paper, but it is much more than just academic training. Our goal is to go over the historic tradition, the recent history, and the actual formats of the clinical case. We wish to advocate for its validity and value as a tool for scientific, educational, and healthcare purposes. We also wish present our view on its educational potential, which is inherent to writing a clinical case. Lastly, we provide a few strategies to approach the writing of a clinical case of radiographic interest aimed for publication.

Historic tradition, recent history, and actual formats

The clinical case is a traditional educational formula.^{11,16} Its format and contents have evolved parallel to medical practice and the understanding of medicine in every historic period. During the scientific revolution, the clinical case consolidates itself as the paradigm of the value attributed to observation. At the end of the 19th century, William Osler recommends "*Always note and record the unusual. Publish it. Place it on permanent record as a short, concise note. Such communications are always of value*".¹⁷

During the second half of the 20th century, the clinical case adopts its actual format. Between 1946 and 1976, it represents 38 per cent of all periodic journals published.¹⁸ During the 1980s there is a reversal of the trend. Evidence-based medicine erupts together with its defense of the clinical trial to the detriment of the clinical case.¹⁹ The industry promotes clinical trials, and journals also have a preference for clinical trials for their greater contribution to the impact factor.⁸ The scant demand and the quality of many clinical cases end up restricting their publication.²⁰

However, the clinical case is still alive²¹ and is being vindicated in different settings.¹⁻¹⁵ New guidelines and papers

on how to write it confirm that the clinical case is alive and kicking.^{9,14,22} New formats appear such as the problem case,²³ the narrative case²⁴ and the evidence-based case.⁵ The huge educational potential of writing a clinical case justifies the growing interest and large number of advocates. Various authors suggest that writing clinical cases may be relevant in the curricular training of undergraduate students and residents.²⁵⁻²⁸

Scientific value of the clinical case

Rarity

In many cases published, rarity is the main ingredient. Rare conditions, called *zebra* in the U.S. medical slang, are hard to diagnose, but they can be rewarding to those who identify these conditions.²⁹ Unfortunately, both pragmatism and experience make us to rule out these conditions without even paying much attention to them. Their publication as clinical cases reminds us of their existence and draws everyone's attention.

Novelty

Novelty is another common trait of clinical cases. However, novelty can be relative. Sometimes, adopting an original point of view is all we need to find new approaches to different ailments.³⁰ On the other hand, many clinical cases inform the radiologist on what other specialists already know. But this does not mean that they do not accomplish their mission which is, basically, the spread of knowledge.

Anecdote

Most clinical cases are just anecdotic.³¹ Although the anecdote has pejorative connotations in the scientific setting, it may be a useful tool in the field of medical training.³² We should not forget that the history of science is full of anecdotes and coincidences,³³ and the history of radiology is not an exception.^{34,35} The resilience of the clinical case shows the historic role that the anecdote plays in the advancement of medical knowledge.

Knowledge

Scientific knowledge consists of facts verified and widely accepted.³⁶ Also, scientific knowledge includes beliefs, opinions, and other intuitive elements whether chaotic or complex, that evidence-based medicine tends to ignore.³⁷ The clinical case acts as an effective proxy for many of them. Scientific knowledge is particularly heterogeneous.³³ It includes contents and skills in different areas such as anatomy; physics; statistics; ethics; pathology; reasoning; communication; risk; instrumentation; and the radiographic appearance of the disease. In all these areas, the role that the clinical case can play is very important.

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