

Reviewer's report

Title: Instructions to authors on case reporting: A survey of a core journals list

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Reviewer: Jan Vandenbroucke

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General

The issue raised by this paper is "Do journals give instructions about case reports, beyond the formal aspects like number of words, etc." The authors hint that journals should give more instructions as to the content of case reports. One wonders whether one should expect this of journals. Should journals also give instructions about case-control studies, genetic linkage studies, prognostic studies etc. In short, should journals give instructions about what ought to be the content of science (or education) and what is not?

If one thinks of guidelines, like for example the Consort guidelines for RCTs, these are about the clarity and uniformity of reporting. Guidelines for RCTs are in principle much more do-able, because there is a common format to RCTs. For case reports that is in principle different: case reports and case series are important because they strike the eye (which is somewhat tautological: they are important because they are deemed important by the lesson they teach). Given the very diverse purposes of case reports (which the authors acknowledge), a uniform structure is most likely impossible. The only thing case reports have in common is that they should clearly express what is the (single) point that they want to make. That, however, they have in common with all scientific papers – one can find admonitions to be very clear about the point that you want to make in all elementary "guides to writing a scientific paper". An additional hidden agenda for editors to be more explicit about case reports than about other types of study might be that they want to prevent being swamped by them, and warn authors in advance that they will only publish them if worthwhile (i.e. "striking"). In that aspect case reports might be different from other types of communications.

The authors have compiled information from the instruction for authors of a large number of journals. In the light of the above, such compilation does not suffice. They have not thought about the purpose of instructions for authors, nor how this purpose should apply to case reports. Moreover, they have not searched the literature on "case reports" thoroughly. They have used one reference by myself, for which I am grateful, but they have left out the excellent work by Jenicek (which I cite extensively in my paper), as well as others that have written about the purpose of case reports (could be found by a PubMed search).

The "hypothesis" forwarded by the authors, that instructions about case reports might differ for different types of journals, carries little weight, and seems rather construed, as all types of clinical journals use case reports.

Finally, the score that 60% of journals mention something about "unusual", or 55% about "innovative points" is interesting. The authors fail to mention how many journals mention either "innovative", or "unusual, or "instructive" since these are all rephrasings of the same idea, i.e. that case reports are only worthwhile if "striking". Such a sum score of all these different expressions might be much higher than the individual 60 or 55 % and would give a different picture of what journals actually do. I am not enthusiastic about the author's table 2 with their suggestions, which a rewording of earlier publications by others, but is at the same time too extensive (too diverse), and not really

comprehensive (not everything is included). Also their suggestion of a literature review of similar cases is nearly impossible (unless in a separate publication on the net).

In short, the authors have laboriously compiled, but they have neither read, nor thought. The presentation of the manuscript leaves to be desired as there are several errors of punctuation, as well as inconsistencies in the use of language (an essential element of medical writing is to use consistently the same words for the same idea).

What next?: Reject because scientifically unsound

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None