The importance of medical case reports

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Abstract
The essay emphasises the importance of medical case reports. It defines the medical case report by referring to Sigmund Freud's and Paul Pierre Broca's works and analyses the attitude of the medical scientific community towards this type of publication. A question arises whether case reports still have a role in furthering medical knowledge and education. An overview of the applied linguistics literature on this subject is presented.

Keywords Biomedicine; case report; scientific community; applied linguistics; medical education.

Medical case reports, called “case notes” in the 19th century and “case histories” or “case studies” later on, are defined as uncontrolled scientific observations of a single clinical observation or “circumstantialities” that must be carefully documented to serve as valuable education and research tools.1 Sir William Osler (1849-1919), the father of modern medicine and one of the founding professors at Johns Hopkins Hospital, himself the author of many case reports, encouraged physicians to “always note and record the unusual... and publish it.”

Case reports have made and still make a valuable contribution to the advancement of medical science.2 McCarthy and Reilly report that a search of the MEDLINE database from 1996 to 2000 using the term “case report” retrieves just 160 articles in 1953 and 4,011 in 2006.3 Many medical professionals may come across patients with unusual clinical presentation or reactions to medical interventions not described in textbooks. Publication of these case reports is often the basis for further exploration of the observed phenomenon, opening new fields of interest.4 Vandenbroucke stated that there is no other way but a series of cases to bring a potentially new disease to the attention of the medical community.5 Matthew Cockerill, publisher of The Journal of Medical Case Reports, argues that unique case reports can be valuable for researchers and physicians through depicting new adverse drug reactions or disease symptoms overlooked elsewhere.6

Importantly, different branches of medical education, such as physiology, pathology, pharmacology and anatomy, are brought together in case reports, helping students and physicians develop a holistic approach to patients.7 Also, writing case reports may help improve academic writing skills. Overwriting relevant literature, structuring a case report, and learning how to submit and revise it are essential skills for novice researchers, often started with case reports.

Attitude of the modern scientific community towards case reports
Case reports have lost favour since the 1990s and sole focus on the scientific community.10 Case reports are poorly cited: Patsopoulos found that of 416 case reports published between 1991 and 2001, less than two percent received at least 10 citations in the first two years of publication.11 Because of this disadvantageous effect on impact factor and space limitations, many medical journals now exclude them.

Educational articles, including case reports, however, are the most widely read items of a scholarly journal.12 This is why some mainstream journals are now providing more space for case reports, and there are some new, primarily online, journals dedicated to them, e.g. BMJ Case Reports, The American Journal of Case Reports, Journal of Medical Case Reports, Clinical Medicine Insights: Case Reports, International Medical Case Reports, Journal of Radiology Case Reports. These journals may serve as case banks, allowing doctors all over the world to share new and interesting cases.

Famous case reports
Significant, Freud, best known for his psychoanalysis and theories of the unconscious mind, had a special interest in recording case histories of his patients.8 A report published in the American Journal of Dermatology was one of the first cases of what is now termed AIDS:9 Taatvisainen and Paha noted that reports of illustrative and typical cases were instrumental in the early periods of medical education.10 In our times, medical case reports largely focus on rare and atypical manifestations of diseases.11

Why case reports are still important
Case reports may lead to systematization or hypothesis-based research, and the accurate description of a single patient’s case may form the basis for further exploration of the observed phenomenon, opening new fields of interest.12 Vandenbroucke stated that there is no other way but a series of cases to bring a potentially new disease to the attention of the medical community.13 Matthew Cockerill, publisher of The Journal of Medical Case Reports, argues that unique case reports can be valuable for researchers and physicians through depicting new adverse drug reactions or disease symptoms overlooked elsewhere.14

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Master’s thesis: The construction of impersonality with respect to agency and patient presentation in the main body of medical case reports, concluding that agency and patient presentation in current medical case reports are in line with the commonly held assumption that medicine focuses on a patient as a case of a given disease and not the whole person experiencing illness.16

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