

The Educational Value of Writing Medical Case Reports: A Medical Student's Perspective

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Abstract

Medical case reports are often among the first forms of scholarly activity pursued by medical students and serve as an accessible introduction to academic medicine. Beyond their role in disseminating unusual clinical presentations and important teaching points, case reports provide valuable opportunities for trainees to develop skills in scientific writing, literature review, critical appraisal, and professional collaboration.

Since beginning medical school, I have participated in the preparation of more than a dozen case reports across multiple specialties, gaining firsthand experience with both the rewards and challenges of the publication process. In this perspective, I reflect on key lessons learned from these experiences, including identifying publishable cases, building effective collaborative teams, understanding the role of the medical student within scholarly projects, and developing strong case reports through thorough documentation and literature review. I also discuss the educational value of presenting cases at scientific meetings, navigating journal selection, and responding to manuscript rejection.

Importantly, I argue that the greatest benefit of case report writing extends beyond publication itself. The process fosters deeper understanding of disease pathophysiology, strengthens communication skills, facilitates mentorship, and promotes professional growth. For medical students interested in scholarship, case reports remain one of the most accessible and rewarding entry points into academic medicine. The lessons learned through writing and presenting case reports can have lasting impacts on clinical reasoning, career development, and lifelong learning.

Keywords: Case reports; Medical students; Medical education; Scholarly activity; Mentorship; Academic medicine; Scientific writing; Professional development

Introduction

For many medical students, case reports serve as an introduction to academic medicine. They provide opportunities to engage with the medical literature, develop scientific writing skills, and contribute to scholarly discussions surrounding patient care [1,2]. Although case reports are sometimes viewed as the lowest level of evidence within the hierarchy of medical research, they remain an important mechanism for sharing unusual presentations, novel treatments, unexpected complications, and valuable clinical lessons [3,4].

Since beginning medical school, I have participated in the preparation of more than a dozen case reports across multiple specialties. Some were accepted quickly, others required multiple rounds of revision, and a few were never published at all. Through these experiences, I have learned that the value of case reports extends far beyond publication itself.

Finding the Right Case and Building the Right Team

One of the most challenging aspects of writing a case report is identifying a case that is worth reporting. Medical students are still developing their clinical knowledge and may not immediately recognize what makes a case unique, educational, or clinically important. For this reason, I encourage students to rely heavily on residents, fellows, and attending physicians when evaluating potential cases.

One practical lesson I learned early in training was to pay attention when experienced clinicians become excited about a patient's presentation. If an attending repeatedly comments that a case is unusual or unlike anything they have seen before, there may be an opportunity for scholarship. Several of my most rewarding projects originated simply because a physician expressed curiosity about a case and I asked whether they had ever considered publishing it.

Equally important is building a strong team. While students may have the least clinical experience among the authors, they can contribute substantially through literature reviews, manuscript drafting, figure preparation, and reference management. Experienced clinicians, in turn, provide diagnostic expertise and help place the case in an appropriate clinical context. Successful case reports are often the result of combining these complementary strengths.

Writing a Strong Case Report

Although journal requirements vary, most case reports contain an introduction, case presentation, discussion, and conclusion. Beyond understanding the structure, however, students should focus on presenting a clear clinical story supported by relevant evidence.

One common mistake is including either too much information or too little. The goal is to provide enough detail for readers to understand the patient's presentation, diagnostic evaluation, treatment course, and outcome without distracting from the central teaching point. Asking mentors which aspects of the case are most clinically relevant can be extremely helpful.

Whenever possible, objective evidence supporting the diagnosis should be included. Laboratory studies, pathology findings, imaging results, genetic testing, and other confirmatory data strengthen a manuscript and increase its educational value. High-quality clinical photographs and imaging studies can be particularly valuable, helping readers visualize findings that may be difficult to describe with text alone.

In my experience, some of the strongest case reports were those that were supported by thorough documentation and communicated a clear clinical lesson.

Presenting Before Publishing

Students often focus exclusively on publication, but conference presentations can be equally valuable [5]. Presenting a case at a local, regional, or national meeting provides an opportunity to receive feedback from clinicians with different perspectives and levels of expertise. These discussions frequently identify additional teaching points, relevant literature, or alternative interpretations that strengthen a subsequent manuscript.

Conference presentations also help students develop communication skills and professional confidence. Explaining a patient's presentation and management to an audience requires a deeper level of understanding than simply writing about the case. Additionally, these meetings create valuable networking opportunities and provide scholarly experiences that can strengthen a curriculum vitae.

Lessons Beyond Publication

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that publication should not be viewed as the sole measure of success. Not every manuscript will be accepted, and rejection is a normal part of academic medicine. Several case reports I worked on were rejected before eventually finding a home elsewhere, while others never reached publication despite significant effort. Although these outcomes were initially discouraging, they taught me resilience and ultimately improved my writing.

Case reports have also provided some of the most meaningful educational experiences of my medical training. The process

of reviewing literature, understanding diagnostic criteria, and exploring disease pathophysiology often results in a level of understanding that far exceeds what can be gained through traditional studying alone. Some of the diagnoses I have written about are conditions that I now feel exceptionally comfortable discussing because I spent weeks investigating the nuances of their presentation and management.

Beyond the medical knowledge gained, case reports have introduced me to mentors who later became collaborators, advisors, and advocates. Strong mentorship has consistently been associated with increased scholarly productivity and career development among trainees [6], and I have witnessed this firsthand throughout medical school.

Conclusion

For medical students interested in scholarship, case reports remain one of the most accessible entry points into academic medicine. They provide opportunities to learn from patients, develop meaningful mentorship relationships, strengthen scientific writing skills, and deepen one's understanding of disease. While publication is certainly rewarding, the greatest value of writing case reports lies in the educational and professional growth that occurs throughout the process. Looking back, the lessons I learned from writing case reports have extended far beyond academic writing and have helped shape the way I approach medicine itself.

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