
THE MERITS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CLINICAL CASE REPORT

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Introduction:

The clinical case report has a long-standing tradition in the medical literature. While its scientific significance has become smaller as more advanced research methods have gained ground, case reports are still presented in many medical journals. Some scholars point to its limited value for medical progress, while others assert that the genre is undervalued.

Objectives:

To assess the medical scientific community's viewpoints on the merits and limitations of the case report.

Method:

We searched PubMed and Google Scholar and select textbooks on epidemiology and medical research for articles discussing the merits and limitations of clinical case reports and performed a non-systematic review.

Results:

The major merits of case reporting were these: Detecting novelties, generating hypotheses, pharmacovigilance, high applicability when other research designs are not possible to carry out, allowing emphasis on the narrative aspect (in-depth understanding), and educational value. The major limitations were: Lack of ability to generalize, no possibility to establish cause-effect relationship, danger of over-interpretation, publication bias, retrospective design, distraction of reader when focusing on the unusual.

Conclusions:

Despite having lost its central role in medical literature in the 20th century, the genre still appears popular. It is a valuable part of the various research methods, especially since it complements other approaches. Furthermore, it also contributes in areas of medicine that are not specifically research-related, e.g. as an educational tool.