

EDITORIAL

Case reports as a resource for teaching and learning

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Preparing the next generation of health professionals is a collective responsibility. All health professionals have a role to play in contributing knowledge that can enhance teaching and learning for health students across the educational spectrum. Health professionals in general have a commitment to lifelong learning and this commitment is reflected in our professional standards and guidelines, and our literature [1]. Indeed, healthcare practice changes quickly in response to new diseases, treatment modalities, and changing patient needs. Thus, lifelong learning is essential if we are to successfully meet the needs of the communities we serve.

As we develop professionally, our learning needs and styles of learning mature and develop [2]. For example, graduate health professional students often have a rich range of clinical experiences to draw on that can enhance their learning and their insight into the need for ongoing learning. However, for those in the pre-service educational setting, there may be far less clinical experiences to draw on, and so it falls to faculty to ensure that students are provided with current and contextualized cases upon which their learning can be based. Indeed, there are challenges associated with adequately preparing students to face the rigors of clinical practice. It is here that case reports can potentially fill a void.

Case reports bring a contextualized account to the classroom. Each case report represents a healthcare encounter involving a real person with a real clinical problem [3]. Through case reports, real-world concerns and experiences are able to be brought into the classroom and research suggests that using case studies based on episodes of “real life” provide learning opportunities that can support knowledge, improve attitudes, and enhance skills development [4]. The reporting of a case assimilates theory and practice and highlights the key individual factors that were the catalyst for clinical decision-making and action, and also provides students with crucial information about the outcomes.

Case reports allow students to engage with real clinical scenarios, and to contemplate the decision-making and actions of the treating team. However, in addition to the

focus on health issues, case reports can be used to stimulate students in considering the wider social, cultural, political, and economic issues that may contribute to and impact on the health status of an individual. This can then be used as a lens to consider issues more broadly.

Effectively working with other disciplines is an essential skill for all healthcare professionals, and inter-professional learning using case reports may contribute to and foster knowledge sharing and development of the required competencies to successfully collaborate with peers [5]. With the increased emphasis being given internationally to inter-professional education for healthcare professional students [6], case reports can provide a learning opportunity and be a useful strategy to enhance inter-professional student learning activities. In addition, sharing practices through case reports provides a means to actively engage students and through insight into the use of clinical guidelines, encourage them to consider issues around guideline-informed practice. As with any teaching and learning activity, there is a need for skilled facilitation to actively engage students to enable them to get the best from engaging with case reports.

Current health environments are complex, as are the patients seen within these environments. All health professionals need to be active lifelong learners, so they are in a position to underpin their practice with the most current evidence; yet, often translation of evidence into practice can be fraught with difficulties. Case reports offer a lens in which to view single episodes of care which are often used to facilitate the understanding of a larger body of evidence. Case reports bring to the classroom real-life tangible scenarios that provide students with high value learning experiences. Under the guidance of a skilled facilitator case reports offer a rich and in-depth learning experience in the class room for all disciplines across health care.

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