

# Case Report Tutorial

## What is a Case Report?

A case report is a detailed account of signs, symptoms, treatment, and follow-up of an individual subject. They serve as a medium for clinical research in many disciplines including manual therapy. Case reports provide an initial step in the research process where future research questions and proposals are born. They often have important clinical lessons and at times can be important in clinical breakthroughs (AIDS and Hodgkin's Disease were both initially reported in case reports<sup>1</sup>). Case reports often reflect on the unusual occurrence in healthcare or provide insight into new techniques, tests or drugs. They provide new information that has not been previously published in peer-reviewed literature. For massage therapists there is a lot of room for discovery and case reports may provide the initial step.

Massage therapy is field where scientific research is relatively new and therefore case reports are important to build the foundational evidence to carry out more in depth research projects. Case reports also allow for therapists to participate in the research process. The purpose of this tutorial is to guide you through the case report writing process and help you become more capable in your research skills.

## Type of Case Reports

There are two types of case reports: retroactive and proactive. A retroactive case report is one done after the fact. The client has already come to see you, you have performed all treatments and you have taken detailed notes on the case. In this case report you are

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<sup>1</sup> Levin, M. (1998). How to Write a Case Report. *Resident and Staff Physician* vol. 44(1). pp. 60-63.

recalling the case because it proved interesting or there were valuable lessons learned in the case. A proactive case is one in which you have met the client but treatments have not finished and outcomes are still in the future. Proactive case reports are written with the intent of creating a written case report with an interesting client. Retroactive case reports carry more credibility because they are done with no bias, while the intent to make a proactive case report can inject bias into the case. Both the retroactive and proactive case reports are viable avenues of important research and often circumstances will dictate which type you choose.

### **Content and Format**

The content and format of a case report in massage therapy is very similar to S.O.A.P. notes that we take every day. The content of the case report includes an introduction, a case, and a discussion. These are usually presented in that order with a title preceding and a bibliography following. These parts of the case report will be explained in more detail below. The massage therapist needs to keep in mind that these are guidelines and certain content may be favored based on the case.

The introduction provides readers with a first look at the case and places that in context. Important points to the introduction include a brief statement of why the case is interesting or important, definitions of terms that are required to understand the case, a background of the condition and a literature review of the condition. The literature review may prove the most difficult portion of the introduction. It requires the therapist to do searches for previous research about topics regarding the case and present this information concisely. For example, if a case report was written about massage therapy

and chronic tension type headaches, the writer would want to search for other articles already written about massage therapy's effects on tension type headaches and place their research in that literature context.

Following the introduction is the bulk of the case report in the case content. The case portion of the report presents information in a similar fashion as S.O.A.P. notes. We are presenting our S.O.A.P. notes in great detail in a case report. Within the case the therapist should include details about the subject including all relevant subjective and objective information (e.g. age, height, sex, activity level, ROM measurements, orthopedic test results, pain levels, etc...). The reader should have a clear picture of the subject.

Also in the case portion the therapist will outline in detail the treatment provided in each session(s) and the results or outcomes of those sessions. Details of techniques and musculature is important in this section; the A. of your S.O.A.P. notes should guide you. The results of the case should also be presented in a clear and concise way describing any changes in measurements and client reaction to the treatment.

The discussion section of the report allows the therapist to reflect on the case and interpret results. Issues of limitations should be mentioned as well as suggestions for future research. In the discussion section the writer should also describe in more detail why this case was important and what lessons could be learned from the case.

We have provided the manual therapist with a worksheet to use as they are carrying out their case report. The following worksheet should be used as a guide in choosing a case study and writing a case study. The blank spaces should be used to fill-in the content of the case report. Again it should be stressed that in some cases certain

sections will be more important than others and the therapist should use their judgment as to the content of the report. No identifying details should be given for the subject allowing the person to remain anonymous (i.e. name, workplace, contact information, etc....).

### **Conclusion**

The case report is a simple and detailed approach to gathering evidence about one specific client. Detail and brevity are the two most important characteristics of the case report. The massage therapist should use the guidelines provided in order to give a detailed account of an interesting case. Case reports are integral in creating a foundation of research for massage therapy, as well as providing for questions and comments to direct future research projects.