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Writing for publication: a practical guide

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Summary

Nurses in clinical practice tend not to view writing for publication as part of their role, and often fail to recognise the value of written communication as a means of sharing valuable knowledge and expertise with others. The tendency to view writing for publication as an arduous and daunting task, reserved only for those in academia, may deter the novice writer. This article aims to encourage nurses in clinical practice to consider writing for publication and actively contribute to professional development through the dissemination of nursing knowledge. The article also provides a practical guide for writing a research and quality improvement article.

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THE COMMON USE of the term 'to publish or perish' is generally associated with the imperatives of academic life (Worrall-Carter and Snell 2003, Happell 2005) and may inadvertently deter nurses from writing for publication.

The term also projects a sense of urgency and pressure (Schilling 2005). The Australian Government Productivity Commission (2005) highlighted the high workloads experienced by nurses in clinical practice. In light of such work

pressures and the view of publication as an academic task, busy nurses may have little time to devote to writing for publication.

The ongoing development and articulation of nursing knowledge rely on a more positive and constructive view of publication. Although there is a tendency in the nursing profession to favour oral communication over the written word (Hardey *et al* 2000, Martin and Street 2003), writing for publication is an important means of communicating knowledge, skills and experience to the wider population and improving outcomes for the recipients of nursing care on a greater scale (Edwards and Valley 2003, Meadows 2004). However, writing for publication can be a daunting task with potential authors being unsure of where or how to start (Happell 2005).

Getting started

Writing for publication can be a rewarding activity. It provides the opportunity for sharing knowledge, skills and experiences with peers, which may ultimately lead to a change in clinical practice. By publishing one's work the opportunity to receive feedback is realised and this may further advance the knowledge and expertise of the writer. Furthermore, seeing one's work in print is a source of great pride and sense of achievement. Some journals pay authors for published work, so there may also be financial rewards. However, the major benefits are associated with the personal and professional development achieved through mastering the skills embodied in writing for publication.

Choosing what to write

The practice of nursing offers many opportunities for research, evaluation and articulation. However,

for such work to be publishable it needs to be presented in an ordered and systematic manner requiring a level of skill not readily available to all nurses. Nurses may have already collated data or information from the following sources:

- ▶ Higher degree theses.
- ▶ Quality improvement projects.
- ▶ Conference presentations.

Higher degree theses The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2004) revealed that an increasing number of nurses were completing higher degree qualifications. In many instances these nurses would have completed a thesis or clinical project as part of their degree. However, only a small proportion of these nurses go on to submit their degree work for publication (Heyman and Cronin 2005). Heyman and Cronin (2005) gave two main reasons for this. First, by the time the thesis is completed, the student often feels exhausted by the topic that has consumed his or her attention for such a long period of time. It can be difficult to raise the motivation and enthusiasm to convert that work into articles for publication. Second, it can be difficult to take the large body of work from a thesis and write a short, succinct article that is important and interesting in its own right rather than as part of a larger project. Authors who attempt this may receive unfavourable critique from reviewers. At times this can be devastating and can deter the author from another attempt.

Dissertations not only provide a valuable source of information, but tend to be undertaken with rigorous academic supervision, meaning that the dissertation is likely to be a comprehensive, informed and high-quality piece of work. Furthermore, the completed dissertation will be examined by experts in the field, who will provide a valuable critique of it and award a pass or fail based on its merit.

In addition to those nurses who do not submit their work for publication, it is likely that there are many others who submit but have their articles rejected or major revisions suggested. Heyman and Cronin (2005) identified a variety of reasons for the rejection of articles based on dissertations including:

- ▶ Inappropriate journal choice.
- ▶ Attempting to include the entire thesis in one short article.
- ▶ Not considering the perspective of readers with no knowledge of the project background.

- ▶ Unbalanced use of a limited word count.
- ▶ Failing to debate key assumptions.
- ▶ Ignoring instructions to authors.

Such mistakes are made by many authors; however, trying to present a full thesis in a single article is particularly common and can result in the superficial treatment of data, the absence of a clear argument or discussion and a lack of significance. As an alternative, some authors choose a particular aspect of the dissertation to write an article. While this is a legitimate practice, the article needs to be understood and appreciated by readers who are not privy to other components of the thesis. A comprehensive guide to publishing work from a higher degree dissertation is presented by Heyman and Cronin (2005).

Quality improvement projects As health services continually strive to produce the most favourable treatment outcomes within a financially constrained environment, quality improvement projects have become integral in ensuring that services produce positive outcomes for consumers (Moss and Thompson 1999, Smith 2000). While quality improvement projects do not generally have the same level of rigour as formalised research, they nevertheless often follow a systematic process for the collection of data to answer or address a problem or issue. Such projects are grounded in practice and are therefore of clear relevance to nurses in clinical practice. For example, Spearing (2002) acknowledged the work of nurses in infection control and suggested the publication of quality improvement projects as a necessity to advance professional discipline in this particular area.

Evidence-based practice requires more than the collection of data, and information needs to be disseminated into the broader literature through means such as journal articles. Dissemination will inform the wider population about this information, therefore enabling practice and the quality of care to be changed as the result of evidence-based practice.

Despite the potential relevance of quality improvement articles, they do not tend to be published as frequently as research articles. This may be the result of a lack of time or expertise to write for publication, non-recognition of the importance of the work and the fact that quality improvement projects do not generally fit in with the structure usually expected when writing research articles (Moss and Thompson 1999, Smith 2000).

Conference presentations Nurses frequently present information at professional conferences (Cleary and Walter 2004). However, nurses tend not to publish the information presented in a more formal manner. There are likely to be many

reasons for this: lack of confidence in writing skills, lack of appreciation for the importance of publishing and, of course, insufficient time is often a factor.

Choosing a journal

There is no obligation to begin by writing full articles for peer-reviewed journals. Writing a letter to the editor or a brief opinion piece is often a useful beginning, particularly as a means of increasing confidence (Smith 2000). The number and variety of journals for nursing, health care and related disciplines (Mee 2003) may make it difficult for nurses to decide where to publish their work. In preparing an article for publication the choice may become obvious. The journals that have published literature which you are using for research purposes may be interested in the work that you are attempting to produce. The views of others who have submitted to the journals you are interested in may also be helpful (Happell 2005).

The readership of journals varies and it is important to consider the type of audience you wish to reach, for example, clinicians, academics or policy makers. It is also important to ensure that the selected journal publishes the type of article you are writing. For example, some journals may only publish research articles, while others may also be interested in literature reviews and clinical reviews.

Types of article

There are different types of article that can be published in journals including research articles, clinical articles, literature reviews, debates and opinion pieces. This list is not exhaustive but rather it demonstrates the variety of publishable material.

Research articles Research articles present the findings from a research or evaluation project in a clear and comprehensive manner, which facilitates analysis not only of the results themselves, but also of the methodological process adopted. These articles are generally set within the context of existing knowledge related to the area, and ideally, results are discussed in relation to the implications for nursing practice and patient care. Research articles can be based on a broad array of research methods. It is not within the scope of this article to describe the differences between methods but rather to note that some journals have a requirement or strong preference for one type of article over the other.

Quality improvement articles Quality improvement represents the desire of healthcare providers to ensure that clinical practice leads to the best possible outcomes for consumers of

services. These quality improvement projects differ from conventional research in that they seek to address problems identified at a local level, rather than to produce findings that might readily be relevant and applicable to a broad range of settings (Moss and Thompson 1999). While the problem under investigation might be specific, it is unlikely to be unique. Health professionals in different settings may experience and attempt to deal with similar problems, and could learn from the experiences of others in identifying and overcoming clinical problems.

Literature reviews Confusion between a systematic review and a literature review is common. A systematic review summarises the medical literature using specific and explicit methods to review and critically appraise the relevant research using appropriate statistical techniques to combine the studies deemed valid (Bandolier 1994-2007). Literature reviews are a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of a specific aspect of nursing or practice. They need not necessarily be exclusively research based.

Reviews must be extensive and include the most recent published articles and reports. The conclusion must be strong bringing together similar and conflicting views from the articles reviewed, and the relevance to nursing or practice should be emphasised. Literature reviews should make a contribution to knowledge, rather than present a brief synopsis of the available literature. There are certain challenges in writing literature reviews so that they are relevant. In particular, it is important that the review has a clear purpose or argument so that it appears as more than a catalogue of what has been written on a topic. The relevance to nursing practice must also be explicitly stated. When done well literature reviews are useful to others with an interest in a particular area.

Clinical articles Clinical articles are an informative description of a particular nursing initiative or procedure. It is not sufficient to simply describe the practice, and such reviews should include a literature review, a clear rationale for relevance to nursing and implications for practice.

Debates Debates can make a significant contribution to a topic or issue relevant to nursing or health care, by drawing together different arguments in a clear and logical fashion. They can be particularly useful in emphasising the complexity of the prevailing healthcare system through a considered critique of an issue from two or more perspectives. It is important that different sides of the argument are presented in detail. Authors often write debate articles because they have a strong view about a particular topic. However, this may result in the deliberate or inadvertent preference for one side

of the discussion, which may result in a polemic rather than balanced argument. This is not acceptable and should be avoided.

Opinion pieces Opinion pieces are essentially similar to debates, with the exception that only one point of view is presented, that of the author(s). In some cases this type of article may be requested by a journal editor who may put together two or more opinion pieces from a number of different perspectives, addressing one issue, to present a balanced view. However, authors may submit an unsolicited opinion piece. Although there is no requirement to present an opposing point of view, the opinion should be well argued and substantiated through the use of available literature and other relevant sources of evidence.

The writing process

A clear and coherent structure is an important component of any publication. Structure assists the author to remain focused on the topic and present information in a manner that can be readily understood by the reader.

The structure of the article will depend on the type of article being written. The majority of professional journals have specific formats and instructions to authors, which should be adhered to (Happell 2005). Whatever the style adopted, the article should have a clear and logical structure and provide a coherent argument. It should contain some analysis and critique of relevant work on the subject as well as describing the author's ideas and concerns. The following section provides an overview of the format required for writing research and quality improvement articles.

Structure applying to quality improvement and research articles *Title* The title should provide as much information as possible in the fewest number of words. It is important that the title reflects the content of the article as otherwise this can be misleading for readers and may not attract the desired readership.

Abstract Most journals will request that articles are submitted with an abstract, however, the type of abstract will vary according to the journal and the type of article. The abstract provides a brief but comprehensive overview of the main contents and focus of the article, and often represents the point at which the reader makes a decision whether or not to read the article. For research and quality improvement articles, it is imperative that the abstract contains a concise summary of the study or

project. Many journals specify the maximum number of words required – ranging from 100-300 words – and some require a structured abstract with specific subheadings, for example, aim, methods, results and conclusion.

In the absence of a specified structure the abstract should open with a short statement to describe the importance of the study or quality improvement project. It should then articulate the purpose of the investigation followed by a brief description of the method (research) or design (quality improvement), taking into account data collection methods, participants and sampling techniques, and the approach to data analysis. A brief summary of the results or findings should follow. The final area covered in the abstract should focus on the broader implications of the findings for practice, research and/or education.

Structure applying to quality

improvement articles *Outline of the problem*

This section provides an overview of the problem addressed by the project. For example, the observation of an increase in cross-infection in a surgical unit. It should be stated as clearly and succinctly as possible.

Literature review The importance of a literature review for quality improvement articles is not clearly stated in the literature. Indeed, the guidelines articulated by Moss and Thompson (1999) do not specify the need for a literature review. However, reviewing the existing literature enables the author to understand what is already known about the topic and is therefore as important in quality assurance as it is in research. The experiences of others might not specifically address the identified problem, but may represent a useful starting point in determining the best approach to be taken in addressing the problem. As the number of quality improvement articles published continues to increase, the literature review is likely to become increasingly relevant.

Design The design section is similar in some respects to the methods section of a research article. However, it is not necessary to have the same level of detail in describing the methods and process of ensuring rigour as that expected of research. Furthermore, an overview of the process should also be considered including, for example, who was involved in designing and conducting the study and how the study was approached (Cox *et al* 1999).

Background and setting A brief summary of the setting for the project should be presented in this section of the article. Information such as where the project was carried out and the type of population involved should be included. This assists readers to determine the relevance of the issue and potential solutions, which may be applicable to their setting.

Key measures for improvement This involves the identification of what is needed to determine if improvement has occurred, or what changes to consumer outcomes would signify an increase in the quality of care following the completion of the project (Moss and Thompson 1999). This may include, for example, a reduction in mean waiting times in an emergency department.

Strategies for change Strategies for change refer to the intervention(s) used to address the identified problem. For example, the adjustment of rosters to ensure that sufficient numbers of staff are available in the emergency department during the busiest periods.

Effects of change It is important to document observations made following a project. These should be measured against the desired changes mentioned in the key measures for improvement section identifying whether any of these changes were achieved.

Next steps or lessons learnt Essentially, this section summarises the changes observed and how they have contributed to improved outcomes. For example, the reduction in mean waiting times in an emergency department may have improved overall efficiency. This section may also include outcomes that were not initially anticipated, such as patient feedback indicating increased levels of satisfaction following the intervention of improved waiting times.

Structure applying to research articles

Introduction Following on from the title and abstract, a research article should include an introduction providing the context and rationale for the study. The introduction should not be a repeat of the abstract, but should include background information on the topic being studied.

Literature review The review of relevant literature is a requirement for research articles. It is important that a literature review involves more than just a description of the views of the author. The author should offer a critique of the relevant evidence and use this to advance an argument to support the study.

Method The method section should include a description and justification of the methodological approach, setting for the study or project, participants (numbers and characteristics), approach to data collection and the method of data analysis. This information is important to demonstrate that the investigation was conducted appropriately and effectively. A discussion of ethical issues is necessary. Increasingly journals require ethics approval to accept an article for publication. In addition the author should address basic ethical principles, for example, regarding informed consent and confidentiality.

Results This section should provide a detailed overview of the results or findings of the study.

Quantitative investigations should include detailed statistical analysis to allow the interpretation of results. Text is often accompanied by tables, graphs and bar charts as a more succinct visual portrayal of the information. Qualitative findings are generally presented in clear themes addressing specific issues and are generally supported with verbatim quotes from participants.

Discussion The discussion is an important and comprehensive process which involves the summation of the main findings and research results, with reference to the original purpose of the study. Findings should also be discussed in relation to existing knowledge addressed in the literature review section. The clinical significance and implications of the findings for practice should be highlighted, and, if appropriate, recommendations should be made. Recommendations may be made for further research, education and training, or the need for policy reform.

It is important to identify the limitations of the study in this section. Some authors may view the declaration of limitations as an admission of weakness, however, it is important to recognise that all research has its limitations, and acknowledgement of this allows for a more considered understanding of the value of research undertaken and can lead to recommendations for further research.

Conclusion This section should include a brief summary of the main points of the article and the implications and recommendations for future practice. This may include recommendations for further research, for practice and/or for education.

The publication process

Articles must only be submitted to one journal at a time. Many journals now require authors to make a statement that the work has not been previously published and is not under consideration with another journal. Once you have submitted your article to a refereed journal, a decision will be made as to whether to send the article for review. It is therefore important to make sure that your article is complete and that you are satisfied with the copy before you submit it. Presentation is important and it is essential that you carefully proof read your article, checking for sense, spelling and grammatical errors. At this point you will be familiar with the content and might not pick up errors or omissions that are obvious to someone reading the article for the first time. If possible ask a colleague to read through the article to ensure it makes sense and flows well. The value of fresh eyes cannot be underestimated. It is important to

ensure that the manuscript conforms to the instructions to authors and the aims and scope statements for the journal in question. In particular, note the word limit, referencing style and any particular guidelines regarding the structure. Paying careful attention to these guidelines enhances the author(s) chance of having the work accepted for publication.

The time period for receiving feedback from the review process will vary considerably from one journal to another and also between articles. The review time varies between journals depending on a number of factors, including the number of manuscripts a journal receives, the availability of reviewers and the extent to which reviewers return the manuscript in a timely fashion. Delays can be experienced when further review of a manuscript is required. In some instances the two reviewers may have opposing views regarding a manuscript, for example, one may recommend acceptance subject to minor changes while the other recommends rejection, and the editor may decide to seek the opinion of a third reviewer. Although it can increase the time frame for publication peer review provides important feedback from peers and experts

which ultimately enhances the quality and accuracy of the article. Once the article has been accepted it is the property of the journal, and cannot be reproduced without copyright permission. This may cause some frustration with long waiting times but it is imperative to adhere to publishing protocol.

First-time authors are often distressed if their manuscript is not accepted at the first review stage. A request to make even minor changes may be seen as a negative response to the work submitted. It is important to note that articles are seldom accepted at first review even for the most experienced writers. Authors should be encouraged to review their work according to reviewer suggestions where possible. The assistance of an experienced author may be helpful at this stage.

Conclusion

Nurses engaged in clinical practice possess knowledge and expertise, which if shared through the medium of published written work, could inform and enhance practice and improve patient outcomes. Writing for publication is a skill that can be improved with practice, and nursing staff should be encouraged to write, whether in the form of a letter, a short report or a peer-reviewed article **NS**

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