

Editorial: Structured abstracts

From Volume 45 (1992) this Journal, in common with a growing number of others, will require authors to submit structured abstracts. The decision to follow the example of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and our own mother publication, the *British Medical Journal*, has been taken because we subscribe to the belief that a simple but rigid template for abstracts will improve their quality, completeness, and intelligibility.

Many authors throw away the impact of an impressive piece of work by a poorly constructed abstract which fails to convey quickly to the casual reader what was done, what was found, and what was concluded. And yet those same authors must appreciate that it is the most read part of any paper—often the *only* part that gets read at all. Many literature search services will cull only the abstract from a paper and it will be on the basis of that alone that a potentially interested reader will decide whether to obtain the rest of the paper. Such important summaries should therefore be complete, succinct, and easily understood.

The decision to adopt structured abstracts, though, raises the immediate questions of what structure and how rigid it should be. *The Journal of Clinical Pathology* receives a variety of different types of paper including basic research, development of laboratory methods, evaluations of new techniques, and case collections with reviews. We

felt that a structure that was too fussy would not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate such a catholic assortment, so settled on a very simple framework with four sections—*aims*, *methods*, *results*, and *conclusions*. These sections self-evidently refer to (a) the purpose of the study, (b) how it was done, (c) the main findings, and (d) what it all means. Overall length should be around 300 words.

It is our intention only to include structured abstracts in full length articles in the “Papers” section. They will not be required for “Occasional articles” or “Short reports”, though the latter require a brief 150 word resumé that should still provide the same information as a full abstract.

We asked authors to comply with the structured layout during the latter months of 1991 and the resulting abstracts appear in this and subsequent issues. We hope that readers will agree with us that the change helps clarity and completeness. We also hope that future authors will provide abstracts in the same format at the time of first submission to save time for them and the editorial staff. Our ambition is to eliminate once and for all the woolly summary that has to be read six times and the frustrating conclusion, “the findings are discussed”.

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