When Patients Rewrite the Textbooks

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Learning Point of the Article:

Every patient teaches us something new as the real learning in orthopaedics starts when we look beyond textbooks and learn from the cases we treat.

Textbooks remain the cornerstone of medical education. They shape the way orthopedic surgeons are trained. They distil decades of clinical wisdom and research into systematic guidance for the operating theater. Yet, as every practicing surgeon knows, real-world cases do not always fit neatly within those pages. Clinical reality often challenges our assumptions, reminding us that patients themselves are the true ambassadors of evolving knowledge.

This is why case reports are still useful today. They document the exceptions; those rare or atypical scenarios that compel us to refine our understanding and occasionally rethink the established dogma. Each unusual radiograph, uncommon presentation, or unexpected intraoperative finding is not merely an outlier; it is an opportunity for learning.

Textbook Knowledge Versus Clinical Reality

We are taught that anterior cruciate ligament injuries belong to athletes that osteoarthritis afflicts the elderly and that synovial chondromatosis primarily targets the knee. In practice, however, we often meet patients who defy these patterns; a middle-aged homemaker with a complex meniscal tear, a young worker with advanced degenerative knee changes, or an extra-articular ankle mass diagnosed as synovial chondromatosis. Such cases illustrate that epidemiology guides us, but patients often rewrite the narrative.

In these circumstances, the patient becomes both subject and teacher. Their story forces us to adapt, to broaden our diagnostic thinking, and sometimes to modify treatment strategies. The lived realities of such cases plant the seeds that can later grow into broader studies and paradigm shifts.

Why Rare Cases Matter

Case reports are often criticized as being low on the evidence hierarchy. Yet, their true power lies not in statistical weight but in the insights they provide. They sharpen our observation, encourage curiosity, and instill humility when faced with the unknown.

Horan, in an early Journal of Orthopaedic Case Reports (JOCR) editorial, described it eloquently: case reports "encourage an appreciation of the rarity, show a keenness of observation and awareness, stimulate the desire to value the uncommon, look behind the obvious, and pass on the information gained to a wider audience" [1]. Far from being trivial, rare cases illuminate the edges of our understanding – the margins where medicine grows.

Access this article online

Website: www.jocr.co.in

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13107/jocr.2025.v15.i11.6284

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Submitted: 12/08/2025; Review: 23/09/2025; Accepted: October 2025; Published: November 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13107/jocr.2025.v15.i11.6284

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Indeed, the first recognitions of many diseases – Paget's, Legg–Calvé–Perthes, even Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome – began with single case descriptions. Orthopedics is no exception; the outlier often leads the way to discovery.

Patients as Co-authors of Knowledge

Every patient who presents with a rare condition silently contributes to collective medical knowledge. Their case, once published, equips surgeons worldwide with foresight when encountering similar scenarios. In this sense, patients co-author the medical literature.

It is therefore essential that case reports go beyond merely declaring rarity. Each should highlight why the case matters, what it teaches, and how it alters one's everyday practice. A well-written case report transforms an anecdote into a lesson, thereby ensuring that the patient's contribution is preserved with clarity and purpose.

The Role of Case Report Journals

In today's evidence-driven climate, journals devoted to case reports fulfil a vital role. Without them, many unique clinical lessons would never reach a wider audience. JOCR, in particular, has established itself as a trusted repository for such work, emphasizing clinical messages, learning points, and practical relevance.

Piolanti et al. recently reaffirmed that "clinical case reports will remain an important tool to improvement," highlighting their role in raising new questions and offering solutions in rare scenarios [2]. Similarly, the JOCR editorial board stresses the importance of balancing clinical experience with evidence-based practice, thus ensuring that rare cases remain part of orthopedic progress [3].

By curating these narratives, JOCR not only expands the knowledge base but also strengthens the connection between science and practice. Evidence provides averages, but clinical experience reminds us of the exceptions – and it is often the exceptions that prevent us from making dangerous assumptions at the bedside.

Looking Ahead

As orthopedic surgeons, we must welcome the unexpected. Each rare presentation challenges our inherent understanding and broadens our perspective. When a patient's story diverges from what textbooks predict, it does not signal a failure of knowledge but rather an invitation to enrich it.

Let us, therefore, continue to document diligently, write thoughtfully, and share widely. When patients rewrite the textbooks, it is not contradiction..it is progress.

Declaration of patient consent: The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent forms. In the form, the patient has given the consent for his/ her images and other clinical information to be reported in the journal. The patient understands that his/ her names and initials will not be published and due efforts will be made to conceal their identity, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Conflict of interest: Nil **Source of support:** None

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Conflict of Interest: Nil
Source of Support: Nil

Consent: The authors confirm that informed consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this case report

How to Cite this Article

Rajadurai JWOR, Shyam A. When Patients Rewrite the Textbooks. Journal of Orthopaedic Case Reports 2025 November;15(11): 01-02.