

Structured Abstracts

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Structured abstracts are those that describe a study using specified content headings. In structured abstracts essential information is concisely reported using content headings (e.g. hypothesis or objective, study design, setting, participants, intervention, results, conclusions).¹ The use of specified content headings rather than the paragraph format was suggested by the Ad Hoc Working Group for Critical Appraisal of Medical Literature in 1987, in order to provide more information for articles reporting original research of medical care.¹

The initial objectives for the use of structured abstracts were to help health-care professionals quickly assess a clinical report for content and reliability, to facilitate peer review and to aid accurate indexing and retrieval of reports from computerised databases such as MEDLINE. Many European and American medical journals of high repute have rapidly adopted the structured abstracts, with marked increase in the number of reports with structured abstracts appearing in MEDLINE.

Because of the increased information needed, structured abstracts tend to be longer than the non-structured format. Does restricting space cause a deterioration in the information content? A recent study² concludes that the discipline of creating a structured abstract reminds authors to include information that they would otherwise not think worthwhile, and important features of clinical studies often missing in traditional abstracts are revealed by the structured abstract. The study also found that reviewers are less frustrated by the structured abstracts, even though the review time is no different. The information content of journal abstracts has also been shown to increase with the introduction of the structured format.

There have been criticisms of the structured abstracts in the format proposed by the Ad Hoc Working Group, but these are both few and minor. Though these abstracts will inevitably be longer, they are feasible and acceptable for journal literature. Also, further reporting within the text of the paper submitted for publication might improve with the use of structured abstracts, by increased awareness of authors or editors of important study areas associated with content headings.

The Editorial Board of the Annals Academy of Medicine Singapore has decided that as from 1 January 2000, a structured abstract format would be required for all papers (original articles, review articles, case reports) published in the Annals. The instructions for authors to write up the Structured Abstracts appear at the end-page of this journal. It is hoped that with the use of structured abstracts, there will be an improvement in article content, and a reduction in difficulties of the peer review process.

REFERENCES

1. Ad Hoc Working Group for Critical Appraisal of Medical Literature. A proposal for more informative abstracts of clinical articles. *Ann Int Med* 1987; 107:598-604.
2. McIntosh N, Duc G, Seddin G. Structure improves content and peer review of abstracts submitted to scientific meetings. *European Science Editing* 1999; 25:43-47.

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