

Top tips: writing a strong case study

A case study provides a close up and in-depth look at how a real world situation has unfolded and the range of factors that contribute to this. In the context of MS services, we can use case studies to illustrate the role and impact of the service on people using it and those around them (family and carers). We can also use case studies to explain how an MS Health Professional works with others and undertakes service development in order to better meet the needs of people with MS.

In case studies we are generally seeking to attribute a positive change that has taken place to the work that an MS Health Professional has done and therefore want to describe the circumstances before the intervention, what the Health Professional did and the impact that this had. Case studies can also be used to illustrate the complexity and challenge of a situation in which there was not a positive impact but where important lessons were learned.

Case studies often sit alongside a suite of evidence to demonstrate the value of a service or individual's actions. They bring data sets or descriptions of processes to life. Case studies may be used as standalone documents, or as part of wider reports or business cases.

Here are some top tips for writing case studies:

- **Write in clear, non-technical English.** Explain all medical terms for a lay audience.
- **A case study tells a story.** As with all good stories it should have a beginning, middle and an end.
- **Start off with a strong headline which grabs the reader's attention.** Include in it what the case study shows.
- **Set the scene.** Describe the context, the characters and the scenario. Use data if possible to illustrate how the situation that you're describing is representative of a wider issue.
- **Develop the case study by explaining what happened next.** In some case studies a chronological narrative that explains events step by step will work best. In others you may choose to sum up the story quickly and focus on lessons.
- **Be very clear what was done, and how this made a difference.** Don't assume that the reader will know what you do on a day to day basis. Explain the skills that you used and what you did, and how many visits or how much time this involved. What, as a

MS specialist were you able to bring to the situation that was different to how it would have been dealt with by another health or social care professional?

- **A case study should demonstrate your ability to evaluate an episode of care or an event encountered by your MS service.** Using a set of bullet points midway in a case study is a useful way of introducing a reflective view on what worked well, or particular challenges encountered.
- **End the case study by summing up the outcome.** What difference was made as a result of your intervention? Try to include the impact on the physical symptoms, changes in medication and behaviours (such as improved diet and exercise or steps towards this) and the impact of this on quality of life. If you have used assessment tools before and after an intervention you could highlight this, or include quotes from patients or other health care professionals. Describing what could have happened in the absence of an MS health professional is a useful way of explaining impact.
- **Use quotes if you can.** Hearing things from a patient or carer perspective, or in the words of another health professional, can be a powerful and persuasive tool.
- **You don't just have to focus on the successes.** Case studies can be about challenging situations when difficult problems have not been overcome. MS is a degenerative condition and the case study might highlight the challenges of supporting a patient coming to terms with a difficult and changing condition. Such case studies can be useful tools for professional development, particularly across multidisciplinary teams. The key thing is to explain the barriers and what has been learned.
- **Confidentiality is key,** particularly if you are representing an individual patient's experience and journey. Personal details and locations may need changing to ensure patient confidentiality or the privacy of a health professional. You should make a note that this has been done at the end of your case study.
- **In good practice examples, some patients and health care professionals may be willing to be named.** Such case studies can be a useful endorsement of a service's activities. However, contributors must be fully aware that they are placing their views in the public domain.
- **It's good practice to share your case studies with those that feature in it before you make it public.** It's important to give assurance that their views and experiences are accurately represented in what you write.
- **Once you've identified a potential case study it's worth conducting additional research.** This might mean short phone interviews with health professionals and patients involved to check facts and gather quotes, or a review of data or a relevant piece of literature to add substance to your argument.

- **Many patients would be delighted to feature in a case study.** Do ask for their support.
- **Less is more!** Keep case studies short and to the point to maintain your readers' attention and interest. Exact length will vary, but one side of A4 should be the aim.
- **Bear the audience in mind:** Understanding who will be the key audience for the case study, and what their interest in it is, will help you frame it in such a way that will be the most relevant or appealing to them.