QGWS Episode 2: Writing an introduction

N: Hi, and welcome back! In the last episode we had an overview of the IMRD structure, that is, introduction, methods, results and discussion. This episode will help you learn to write the first IMRD section, the introduction. Many of the examples will come from this article.

V: "Epidemiology of race-day distal limb fracture in flat racing Thoroughbreds in Great Britain"

N: To recap, the topic is a kind of injury which can occur in racehorses: fractures in the distal limb. The purpose of the study is to find out whether injuries like this happen more often under certain circumstances. Section headings can be worded in different ways. For example, this is called "introduction" but this one is called "background to the study." Whatever it's called, the purpose of an introduction is to give background information, helping readers make sense of the text. There are three main approaches to doing this. We'll call them "moves." And there are strategies for accomplishing each move. The first move is to place the study within a meaningful area of research. Here are two strategies our article uses to do this.

V: "Fracture is one of the most common types of race-day injuries in Thoroughbred racehorses, and the majority of fractures occur in the distal limb."

N: In this example, it tells us that distal limb fractures occur frequently, so naturally it's important to understand why they happen. Another strategy is to describe what we already know about the topic. Here's an example:

V: "Fractures most commonly occur when there is an imbalance between microdamage and repair due to repeated, cyclic loading."

N: Describing what we already know about a topic often involves a third strategy, referring to the existing research, like this.

V: "A previous study identified complex relationships between exercise load and fracture risk."

N: The next move is to identify a smaller part of the area that needs more research. To do this, you can choose different strategies.

N: You can point out imperfections in the existing research.

V: "Distal limb fractures with a fatal outcome are not representative of all distal limb fractures."

N: In other words, looking only at fatal outcomes is not optimal. You can also show that it's important to continue an existing line of research.

V: "It is therefore important to study both fatal and non-fatal cases of distal limb fracture, to provide a more general picture of risk factors for this type of injury."

N: The next example uses another strategy, describing a knowledge gap, a question which the research literature has not yet answered.

V: “A previous study identified risk factors for distal limb fracture on all-weather surfaces, but no studies have investigated risk factors for distal limb fracture overall, or specifically for turf racing.”

N: Now you've identified your broad area of research and a space within it where more work is needed. With the third move you announce how your work will fill that space.

N: A common strategy for doing this is to state the purpose of the study.

V: “Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to identify current horse-, race-, course-, trainer- and jockey-level risk factors for race-day distal limb fractures in flat racing Thoroughbreds in Great Britain.”

N: So when you write an introduction, you need to: identify a worthwhile research area; identify a topic within that area which needs more research; and tell your reader what you’re going to do about it. A selection of strategies can help you do these things. And as you may have noticed from the examples, there are some common phrases which can help with each strategy. For example, we've seen this phrase used to identify a gap:

V: “but no studies have investigated. . .”

N: Other common phrases to introduce the gap include this:

V: “It is still not known whether. . .”

N: or

V: “Currently there are no data on. . . ”

N: You can find more phrases like these for introducing your IMRD text in the Academic Phrasebank. Good luck with your introduction!