

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Having late at night just read some thousands of words on the Pool—Global, Central, Expenses, and Net—and on the Pool structure, I feel confused beyond words, thousands of them. To comfort myself I bought a small book called *The Use of English* (Macmillan), by Frederick T. Wood, a schoolmaster in Sheffield. He tells me that competent writing should have four main qualities: it should be clear, euphonious, idiomatic, and suited to the subject. "A writer who fails to say exactly what he means, and say it in such a way that it is free from ambiguities and will be clear to the reader, has failed in what should be his primary purpose."

My heart leapt up when I read paragraph 57 of the Review Body's "Third, Fourth, and Fifth Reports" (price 2s. 3d.). This informed me that the new award "would be equivalent to an average net income from all official sources of just over £3,000 (before tax), and would represent an increase of about £250, or just under 10% in the amount credited to the Pool for each doctor in respect of average net income for Executive Council services only."

Then my heart sank when I read the beginning of the next paragraph but one: "We wish to make as clear as possible the effects that our recommendations are intended to have . . ."

It is all just about as clear as a pea-soup fog. Nearly all the money is going into an expenses pool, or even *the* expenses pool. And the net pool is going up by no more than £10 a year per general practitioner rendering—I believe that is the word—unrestricted services. But of course he's got to be under 70 years of age to go full out free from restrictions.

Dr. Johnson defined "net" as "anything made with interstitial vacuities," and "vacuity" as "state of being unfilled," which is appropriate when applied to the Review Body's use of net income in the context of paragraph 57.

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Mr. Wood gives some amusing examples of the misuse of English. One comes from my favourite Sunday newspaper. A writer on the housing shortage said that "we should set our target as high as possible, and then pursue it with all our might." This is what the Joint Evidence Committee did when it asked for £18m. more net for the 22,000 unrestricted, under-seventy, general practitioners in the N.H.S.

And so far as I can make out they won't get *net* more than their number multiplied by £10, or £220,000. If this sum is wrong then it is the fault of all those who try to mystify by failing to be clear, by catching us all up in the network of their paragraphs.

Dr. Johnson's definition of network is: "Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections." Most of the new money of the award is falling through the interstices of the net, and very little is getting caught up on the intersections.

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Here is another of Mr. Wood's excellent precepts: "Have a sense of occasion. See that the style and the general manner of treatment are fitting to the subject." His examples of the opposite sense amused me and so may amuse others. An examinee (Advanced Level), writing on *Antony and Cleopatra*, said that Cleopatra "has got what it takes." Shakespeare put it differently through the mouth of Enobarbus:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish."

The *Concise Oxford* does not include the word riggish. Dr. Johnson defines it as "wanton; whorish." And he says that "rig" is an old word for a whore.

What a lot of books there are on English! Bergen Evans takes the title of his book *Comfortable Words* from *Richard II*: "Uncle, for God's sake, speak comfortable words." I am afraid I shall have to abandon some of my comfortable illusions. To say that someone's name is mud does *not* mean that "he is as detested as Dr. Mudd was." What a pity! Dr. John Mudd was the physician who treated John Wilkes Booth after his assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Mud is just mud and nothing else—except in the salutation "Here's mud in your eye." According to Mr. Evans it is Australian in origin. "The meaning seems to be an adjuration to raise your glass so high and drain it so completely that all that will be left will be a drip of muddy lees to fall in your eyes."

I did not know before this the origin of "racket," meaning a shady business. Evans says that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pickpockets would arrange for crackers to go off in the streets to distract the attention of their victims, whose pockets they then picked. I am sorry Evans defends the spelling "alright" for "all right." My father used to tell me that the first spelling was "alwrong."

I used to think that to speak and write clearly was to make the sense so clear "that he who runs may read." But Evans says that this is the result of a wrong translation in the authorized version. The Greek version of the Old Testament, he says, should be translated, "So that he that reads may make haste to escape." And if he is wrong and I am wrong in supporting his error we may both make the same rejoinder as Samuel Johnson did to the lady who asked him why in his dictionary he defined *Pastern* as the knee of a horse. He replied, "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance."

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The stupid confusion that surrounds the pool is unhappily being perpetuated. I don't think this is altogether through ignorance. But the Review Body is doing no more than follow the profession's example in this. The confusions will be removed only when the medical profession and the Ministry of Health make a solemn resolve to think clearly when discussing pay. They then may both be able to write sentences and paragraphs that are free from ambiguity. They could begin by using the word pay instead of remuneration, and amount instead of quantum.

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My other proposal is that they should both read, or re-read, Professor John Jewkes's "Memorandum of Dissent to the Royal Commission's Report." It was exactly five years ago, on 10 February 1960. His first paragraph was prophetic:

"I regret that I am not able to sign the report. The setting-up of the National Health Service in 1948 placed upon the State the novel task of working out a harmonious relation to one of the great professions. The first decade of this experiment, at least as regards the fixing of pay, has been far from auspicious. I agree that what the Service needs above all is an end to the prolonged disputes about earnings and the building up of a sense of trust between Government and profession. But, in my opinion, the recommendations of my colleagues in regard to the level of earnings of general practitioners and of part-time consultants will not suffice to restore confidence in these two vital sections of the profession, nor will they provide in the long run an adequate supply of doctors of quality to meet the needs of the Service and any improvements that may be sought in it."

Professor Jewkes wrote: "It is this grip of the Government which explains why the profession has spent so much time, inevitably without success, in search of a formula which would in perpetuity protect it against arbitrary action on the part of the State."

It is this "grip of the Government," I maintain, which should be loosened. And it can be loosened without destroying the N.H.S. There is no sign that the Government wants to loosen its grip. Does the medical profession want it to?

PERTINAX