but these increases in efficiency threaten financial crises.^{21,22}

Attempts to explain variation in admission rates in the context of RAWP have so far concentrated on measures of social deprivation. But that variation is more likely to be due, as RAWP believed, to access to supply. Questions that do not seem to be asked are whether high admission rates are justified in terms of their outcomes and whether increases in admission rates are indeed genuine increases in efficiency. Although difficult, research into these questions is likely to be more soundly based than attempts to estimate the need for health services arising from social deprivation by using data on use and attempting to control for supply. We hope that the final report of the RAWP review recognises that research into the impact of variations in a populations' use of services in terms of outcomes is fundamental to future policies for the fair and efficient allocation of resources.

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How To Do It

Write for money

MICHAEL O'DONNELL

Don't tell the editor, or at least not till after I've been paid, but I am not a good person to give advice about writing for money. I'm unusually lucky in that I've survived by writing what I want to write and then finding someone willing to publish it. It is not a course I'd recommend to anyone concerned with making money. I could call my bank manager as witness.

The nearest I get to a direct bid for the lucre is when I accept a commission for an article, or a script, on a subject I haven't chosen for myself and try to deliver what I hope is expected. But even then the most valuable reward is not the payment—though it can produce a comfortable feeling in the pocket—but the discipline that the exercise imposes. (Again I beg you, gentle reader, please don't tell the editor until he's signed the cheque.)

Publish and be educated

Like everyone else, I find writing a laborious business and I'm sure that if my working habits came under the scrutiny of one of

From *How To Do It: 2*, a new collection of useful advice on topics that doctors need to know about but won't find in the medical textbooks. To be published in October 1987, this is a companion volume to the popular *How To Do It: 1*, also published by the BMJ.

those city analysts who have proliferated under our present regime with the exuberance of thistles in a cow byre, he would consult his Filofax and say I spend too much time writing things that offer a low financial return per mmol of sweated blood. He would, I'm sure, advise me to desist from writing novels and return to writing the television plays I wrote when I was harder up, or advertisements for Snibbo or for Treadgold's Thoroughgrip Garterettes. Just as he would demand that I should never again write for such ill paying publications as... but this is no place to be naming names. The problem with Filofax man, of course, is that while he is good at measuring returns he has no measure of rewards.

That said, let us consider this business of earning money. Doctor writers if they can make any show of competence should find it easier than other writers to get their work published. Thanks to the

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money spent on pharmaceutical promotion, medical publications have proliferated almost as exuberantly as city analysts. One or two are first rate but the content of some reveals the strain their editors are under to find something to keep the advertisements apart. These are useful places for medical writers to learn their craft.

Nearly all the clichés uttered about writing are true, so I don't apologise for repeating the truism that the only way to learn how to write is to write, and to keep on writing. This dreary business of churning out words can be lightened by occasional publication, and doctors are lucky to have a group of editors who are more likely to read their work, comment on it, and even publish it, than the hard faced persons who sit in editors' chairs elsewhere.

Doctors also have an advantage when submitting their work to non-medical magazines and newspapers. People, not surprisingly, are interested in their health. More surprisingly, they are also interested in the antics of doctors. So practising doctors who write about their work simply, directly, and with enthusiasm, have a good chance of selling "A doctor writes..." style articles. The late Dr Alfred Byrne, a hardened Fleet Street correspondent, used to call it "working the bronchitis belt."

Easy reading, hard writing

The key words in that last paragraph are "enthusiasm," "simply," and "directly." If, when you write an article, you can generate no enthusiasm for its subject—a state into which it is easy to lapse if you concentrate only on the lucre—it will quickly bore any reader foolish enough to dip into it, no matter how much technical skill you deploy in its construction. Similarly, unless you can express what you want to say in simple direct prose, much of what you write will remain unread.

It is not easy to be simple and direct. One writing doctor, W Somerset Maugham, claimed: "To write simply is as difficult as to be good." If anything, he understated the problem. Yet achieving an appearance of simplicity is the central skill of the writer's craft. Luckily help is at hand, set out in useful textbooks. My favourite is *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White,¹ a slim volume which contains everything we need to know but will never master in our lifetimes. For more specialised help, I recommend *Thorne's Better Medical Writing*.²

These books describe the simple techniques which underpin our craft. The techniques are easy to understand; the problems—and the hard work—come when we try to apply them. It is dangerous to be dogmatic about writing but here cometh a dogmatic statement that is as near as dammit true. To forge simple direct prose you need to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. An article such as this, for instance, needs to be rewritten at least 20 times. But once again help is at hand in the shape of that electronic marvel called a word processor.

Mechanical and moral support

Any writers who still use typewriters or who, as I once did, use pen and paper, are burdening themselves with unnecessary manual work which is not only tedious but wholly unproductive. The only drawback to using a word processor is that we no longer know how many times we rewrite, and that is a drawback only to the boastful. Gone are those piles of paper, smothered with crossings out and arrows, waiting for a competent typist to produce the final "clean copy" which, of course, never was the final copy and had to be retyped again and again as the words sank beneath the inky tide of corrections.

Thanks to the word processor, writing and rewriting are welded into a seamless process and even a stumbling typist like me can produce printed words which, if naught else, are at least legible. God help us but it's true that some publishers and editors still make their first judgment of the quality of a manuscript on the neatness of its presentation. So if you get your magic machine to type your words double spaced on A4 paper, you're off to a flying start.

That's when you'll need another class of textbook. The best guide

to where the money lies is the *Writers' and Artists' Year Book*³ which lists all the people likely to buy your wares, tells you what they are after, and hints at what they are likely to pay. When it comes to protecting yourself in this jungle, the medical profession is, once again, twice blessed. Two patient support groups exist to help innocent doctors who stray into the threatening world of editors and publishers: the Medical Writers' group within the Society of Authors (84 Drayton Gardens, London SW10 9SB), and the GP Writers' Association, which can be contacted through Dr David Haslam, 33 Biggin Lane, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire.

When contracts grow complicated, as they can with books and television programmes, it's well worth acquiring an agent. A brazen agent will get you more money from publishers than you'd dare ask for yourself—usually more than the 10% which is the only commission a reputable agent will demand. The *Writers' and Artists' Year Book* includes a list of agents and advice on how to approach them.

Yet no matter how brazen your agent, only you can earn the money. So it's back to simplicity, directness, and a word processor, which when deployed with enthusiasm, may warm the cockles of your bank manager's heart and allow you to eat occasional slices of cake instead of bread. If, however, you are tempted to try to make writing your main occupation rather than a part time one, you will need to make more drastic changes to your way of life. Once you start writing for a living, you cannot rely only on technique. You need to cultivate a way of living that feeds your imagination, and you need to discover more about the creature who produces the words, the voice that speaks to the reader when you write. This demands some dedicated introspection because, unless you write with some honesty of purpose, and try honestly to express the complexities within you and which you see around you, your writing will smack of triteness.

To write from any motive other than honesty is to write propaganda. That may not deter you if your only aim is to make money. Propaganda is certainly a profitable form of writing. It demands the same skills and techniques as any other writing and suits many people as a well paid part time occupation. It is, however, thin gruel to sustain the enthusiasm of a full time writer (am I using enthusiasm as a euphemism for obsession?) and you can measure its charm by reading political pamphlets or watching party political broadcasts.

Profit of penitence

I have left the most practical advice till last because it is also the most painful. I have yet to meet anybody who finds the business of setting down words a pleasurable way of passing the time. All of us who write yearn for diversions that will take us away from the desk or from the keyboard or, even better, some urgent matter that will prevent us from even starting. Most writers of my acquaintance compel themselves to write a certain number of words, or to spend a specified time at their desk, every day. Some of the best prose they produce may come during a session which got off to a reluctant start; some sessions which grow out of bubbling enthusiasm may produce only rubbish.

The secret of successful writing is, as Mother Mary Catherine hinted all those years ago on my very first day at school, a matter of self discipline, and the appropriate working garb is sackcloth and ashes. Still, it seems to do no great harm to most of us to play the penitent for a few hours every day—and it does bring temporal rewards. The greater the suffering while the stuff's being hammered out, the greater the joy when we reach the last full stop.

Forgive that late intrusion by Samuel Smiles (another doctor writer, as it happens), but I can sense the final marker racing towards me. The cheque, I trust, will soon be in the post.

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