

## VIEWS & REVIEWS

### FROM THE FRONTLINE

## War of the words

Des Spence *general practitioner, Glasgow*



What we perceive as intelligence is 10% intellect and 90% presentation. A serious expression, the right accent, a knowledge of literature and classical music, and a propensity for attending the theatre are the trappings of the intelligent elite. At medical school you could know who the intelligent were: they were in the library with their intellectual status symbols, piles of thick textbooks and research papers, slowly digesting facts to be vomited up in exams.

For facts are the currency of the bright—safe, certain, yet often dangerously wrong. I was a crammer. My only books were lecture notes, illustrated guides, and short books of lists and bullet points—medicine for dummies. I was, and still am, a fast facts junkie.

Now consider the presentation of our intellect through the written word: we are what we write. The word is often about intimidation, an expression of class, position, and education. The thesaurus is the weapon of choice of the loquacious. And we, the educated, have a propensity for multifaceted and multiclaused sentences: we punctuate them with much superfluous punctuation; we seek to demonstrate a faultless command of grammar, syntax, and even cross-combination. But perhaps I am recidivist and my posturing mere intellectual

antidisestablishmentarianism. *Mea culpa?* “Et tu, Brute?” as it were.

But the world is changing. The internet renders mere knowledge of facts valueless. With articles being read on phones or tablets, no one has the attention span to read anything more than 400 words in one go any more. A tweet is too long now that everyone is a fast fact junkie. For the written word, brevity is now king—and big business. A teenager is selling an app that summarises internet news for “dozens of millions of pounds” to Yahoo.<sup>1</sup>

Along with succinctness, readers value clarity in writing. The Plain English Campaign is fighting a long and bloody crusade against acronyms, obtuseness, and jargon in official writing.<sup>2</sup> And there are messages that medicine could learn. From NHS circulars, to policy documents and guidelines, to letters between doctors, our writing is often dull, pretentious, and impenetrable drivel. Perhaps the much maligned, blunt orthopaedic surgeons should start giving masterclasses on the art of direct, to the point, text.

Truly wordy writing is the preserve of medical research papers, which tend to have a style set in aspic, and language from the 1950s. The obvious intent is to obscure defects in content and conclusions. As a rule, the longer and more intricate the writing style, and the more statistically complex an analysis, the less likely it is that the conclusions have any validity. The time has come for the iPhone generation to assert cultural change on the written word. Keep it short, clear, and simple, stupid.

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ Group policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Yahoo spends “millions” on UK teen Nick D’Aloisio’s Summy app. *BBC* Mar 25 2013. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-21924243](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-21924243).
- 2 Plain English Campaign. Quotes about plain English. [www.plainenglish.co.uk/about-us/quotes.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/about-us/quotes.html).

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2013;346:f3021

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2013