

surgeons in the future, especially if they are confronted by a need to increase their pay bed revenues.

Although the nature of the private sector has changed little between 1981 and 1986, the noticeable expansion in activity, particularly in the Thames regions, once again raises the question of the NHS procedure for resource allocation. Recently proposed revisions to this procedure would, broadly speaking, redirect funding back towards some of the Thames regions. It is difficult to see how the Thames regions can be relatively underresourced, as is implied by this redistribution, when they have the average number of acute NHS beds for the English regions and one quarter of their elective surgical treatments are provided outside the NHS. There is presumably some upper limit on the proportion of elective surgical treatments that can be provided privately before it is felt that some adjustment to the resource allocation formulas should be made. The main problem in including the private sector in the resource allocation calculations would be the practical difficulty of distinguishing between that part of the private sector activity which would otherwise have to be carried out in the NHS and activity which is merely additional to that in the NHS. This issue will become particularly important if the current government review seeks greatly to expand the role of the private sector and, in some manner, to integrate its activity with that of the NHS.

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Correction

Boxing and the brain

An editorial error occurred in this article by Professor J A N Corsellis (14 January, p 105). The painting *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924, was by the artist George Bellows and not George Bellaus as published.

WORDS

• TALLEYRAND SAID IT Words are the building blocks of language whereby one person conveys information to another. This is true, or should be, for scientific writing. In the wider context of language, however, this definition is naive. Talleyrand, the eighteenth century French statesman who always knew when to switch to the winning side, is credited with the remark, "Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts." A person may imply by omission or by obliquity in his choice of words what he does not wish to say plainly. This aspect of word usage reaches its height in the diplomatic service. It also reaches a high level of sophistication in the writing of testimonials and obituaries. I shall give a few examples.

The recipient of a testimonial wants to know whether the applicant carried out his duties satisfactorily, whether he was hard working, keen, and able (and keenness and ability by no means correlate); whether he was reliable and loyal, knowledgeable and intelligent. With "open" testimonials—that is, open to the applicant and usually handed to him—adverse features of his past performance and of his character are conveyed by their omission from the foregoing list. Some knowledge of the writer may be desirable. It is said that the late Professor Gask, of the London Hospital, was in the habit of writing, "Dr Smith was my house surgeon from January to June this year." Just that; and he implied that the mere fact of the appointment was in itself the highest recommendation. The openly hostile states that "the applicant carried out all his duties to his own satisfaction." Most of us prefer a touch of the devious, thus: "He came to us with a distinguished record from

Oxbridge"; "During the six months he had every opportunity of learning from experience." If the testimonial is an open one the writer may be able to count on an applicant's ignorance of nautical idiom, thus: "If you can find him a berth, make it a wide one." Here are some others. "He was always trying very hard—very trying." "Miss Jones was the perfect colleague to have at hand in a tight corner." Of the house physician who could never be found when wanted: "In an emergency Dr Brown would always go far beyond the call of duty." "Whoever succeeds in getting Dr Greene to work for him will indeed be fortunate."

Obituaries have much in common with testimonials. As they are "open" for relatives and friends to read they may be subject to the same obliquities of expression. Furthermore, to those who believe in a hereafter a laudatory obituary may secure entry through the pearly gates; as the following story shows (Senon E Vero, E Ben Trovato, personal communication). In the late 1940s it was widely reported that this exchange took place:

ST PETER	Who are you?
APPLICANT	I am Dr Schnitzelburger.
ST PETER	Not Dr Schnitzelburger, the eminent psychiatrist, by any chance?
APPLICANT	(<i>speaking with a thick Viennese accent</i>) Well, thank you; as a matter of fact I am he.
ST PETER	We're awfully glad you've come. We are a bit worried about the Almighty. He thinks he's Lord Moynihan.*

De mortuis nil nisi bonum (which is generally mistranslated as "About the dead you can speak the truth"). But before I give some examples I must tell you about the two very senior registrars, one of whom said to the other, "Seen any good vacancies advertised lately?" "No," replied the other, "but there are some promising obituaries." When writing the truth about a departed colleague it may be necessary to convey the truth according to an acceptable code. Here are some examples:

"A perfectionist" means an obsessional neurotic.

"Plainspoken" means offensive.

"Not easy to know" means paranoid.

"He enjoyed life to the full" means that he was frequently drunk.

"Somewhat remote" may mean that he was almost always away.

"So popular that patients would wait six months for an outpatient appointment" means that he did his best to encourage private practice.

I make no claim to originality in the above examples of testimonials and obituaries, and if any readers believe that they have heard some of them before, I should like to quote Somerset Maugham, who said, in connection with some of his short stories, that if a story was a good one it was worth telling again.

As readers of this journal know, the editor invites self written obituaries. Mine is already in the file; it will be my final contribution.

B J FREEDMAN

*Lord Moynihan was the grand panjandrum of British surgery between the world wars.