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IMPEDING METRIC CONVERSION

For many years, this writer had served as a self-styled good will ambassador for the metric system. Whenever the subject happened to be discussed with family, friends, or professional acquaintances, we always talked up the merits of the system and the desirability of the United States converting *in toto* to its use.

Moreover, we felt very comfortable in doing so. The metric system is "the system" of the physical and biological sciences; it is "the system" of pharmacy; it is officially endorsed as "the system" by the American Pharmaceutical Association. Hence, by training, background, career, and affiliation, we were in concert with the metric theme. Indeed, we even had several occasions to participate as a witness in presenting testimony before U.S. Congressional committees which were hearing bills dealing with national conversion to the metric system.

On all these occasions, we have repeated what so many others have said in arguing the merits of such conversion; namely, we would be adopting a pure, uniform, and simple system which can be easily learned and, once learned, will remain unchanged forever.

But then some unsettling things began to happen. The first hint that all may not be quite as rosy as we thought was when the controversy arose over whether the preferred unit of volume was a "cubic centimeter" (cc) or a "milliliter" (ml). After what seemed to be a good deal of haggling, this was eventually settled with the result that much revising was necessary in style books, in texts, in calibrations on laboratory equipment, and in the labeling on numerous containers, particularly those of chemicals and drugs.

Then one day the local weather report began to give temperatures in terms of degrees celsius rather than the familiar degrees centigrade. And when we could not immediately explain the difference to our children, we suffered both embarrassment as well as a blow to our personal credibility.

We hardly had time to track this one down when we learned that the presses must be halted for our publications in order that the typesetters could scurry about changing all the "microns" to "micrometers" and the "millimicrons" to "nanometers"—along with corresponding changes in the symbols and abbreviations used in their stead.

What was happening? Why were these and other changes like them being made? Was no one else distressed and disturbed by what to us appeared to be a series of confusing, pointless, and disturbing disruptions?

Well, in the letters column of a recent issue of the American Chemical Society's publication, *Chemical and Engineering News*, we learned that there is at least one fellow sufferer. Dean W. Gibbons of Detroit wrote about his experience trying to keep up with such changes as those mentioned above, as well as a number of others including "torr" to honor Torricelli, the inventor of the barometer, and "kilopascals," presumably in honor of Pascal and his law of the pressure-volume relationship.

"There are better ways to honor our scientific forefathers than to rename familiar metric units," writes Gibbons. And he goes on to add: "Public acceptance of the metric system will depend on whether the system is perceived as simple and logical, or regarded as a jumble of confusion. The use of long-established, descriptive units, instead of the latest fads, will aid the transition from the English to the metric system."

His point is both well taken and well stated. Hopefully, the scientific community is more stable and sedate than the local town officials who will rename Main Street at the drop of a hat to honor—for political reasons—some celebrity or other public figure who is currently in the news.

Those of us who deal with measurement terms and their symbols on a daily basis have difficulty enough remembering which is what, and which is correct. For the general public to cope with such changes is simply asking too much. We hope that the scientists responsible for initiating such changes will recognize that they are doing a real disservice by needlessly impeding the process of metric conversion.

Edward G. Feldmann