

Editorial

I have mentioned before in these pages the propensity for some authors to pepper their prose with acronyms or abbreviations to the confusion of the reader, either because there are so many of them or because the author is using one which is well-known in his field but means something completely different in another. BSA is bovine serum albumin to one, but bistrimethylsilylacetamide to another, and even Birmingham Small Arms to others. The shorter the abbreviation, the more likely it is that it will have more than one meaning, often even in the same field of study, such as the use of PG as a shortened form of both prostaglandin and proteoglycan. For this Journal, the policy is to avoid abbreviations of this type and only resort to their use for long and unwieldy chemical names. We believe this makes for clarity of expression, especially for the casual browser.

There is one two-letter abbreviation that has enjoyed a dual identity over recent years; according to my ancient dictionary of common abbreviations, it used to stand for postcard, police constable, per cent, Parish Councillor (or Parish Council), Privy Councillor (or Privy Council) or Progressive Conservative. Now of course it usually means Personal Computer or Politically Correct. The former may be used in these pages on occasion. Indeed it is more than likely that most of the research now being submitted to the Journal has been carried out with the aid of a PC and almost certainly the typescript will have been produced with a PC's word-processing facility. One would not, at first sight, consider that the latter meaning of PC would have a place in a learned journal concerned only with facts and precise nomenclature. However, one would be wrong! A reasonable working synonym for politically correct would be euphemism, and, consulting my dictionary again, this is defined as 'an inoffensive word or phrase substituted for one considered offensive or hurtful.' Scientists are not lacking in sensitivity, and some, for example, will avoid 'killing' their experimental animals and will prefer to euthanize or sacrifice them (euthanasia: the act of killing someone painlessly, especially to relieve suffering from an incurable disease; sacrifice: a ritual killing of a person or animal with the intention of propitiating or pleasing a deity). The Journal however, would prefer the simpler words; it is really hard to see who is being offended by the plain English.

One word which seems to cause most offence to the PC proponents is 'man'. The first problem with 'man' is that, while it is used to describe the whole species, it also happens to be the word for the male of the species ('dog' has the same problem, incidentally!). In scientific writing, the problem of confusion is sometimes overcome by capitalizing the word as 'Man' when the species is intended, rather than the sex. In this Journal, perhaps to avoid a charge of 'specism', we prefer to let the context make the meaning clear. It seems quite acceptable to write '... the ovary in man ...'.

Unfortunately there are some that take such exception to the three-letter word that they wish to expunge it completely from any context where it implies exclusion of the fairer sex—chairperson, spokesperson, oarsperson. The jokes and jibes in this area are endless and I only quote these as examples. Where the campaign appears to be running out of reasonable credibility, is when the argument is applied to words that just happen to contain that particular sequence of letters, such as 'manager', a term that is (seriously!) banned from some PC organisations—and I am not referring to IBM, Compaq and the like.

The related problem—using 'he' to encompass 'she'—is less contentious in scientific writing, as the occasion rarely arises, although it would be useful to have something that obviates the need to use the inaccurate "its", ugly expressions such as "his/her" or the awkward use of "their" for the singular possessive pronoun. This would be particularly useful in referring to the work of a singular author, when his/her/its sex is unknown: "Jones (1989) described the absorption of gases by activated carbon, but in his/her work . . ." Is this really acceptable? Looking up the original reference may not help; John, Joseph and James, Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary may be obvious enough, but what do you do about Beverly, Hilary, Evelyn, Kimberly, Dale and a growing list of others.

In the Editorial Office, we do have a problem in replying to some correspondents who may sign themselves without a title but with an ambiguous first name; we may avoid the dilemma by bestowing doctorates on everyone and writing "Dear Doctor . . .", not really a satisfactory solution. Of course, we could cast aside natural English reserve and address such people as "Dear Kim . . ." or "Dear Hilary . . ." so giving the impression of being on intimate terms with someone without even knowing what sex they are!

I have deliberately set out in this Editorial to touch upon some of the more trivial aspects of scientific writing. I see I have touched upon Sex, Politics and Religion—all the ingredients of a best seller. But what does this have to do with pharmaceutical science? The *Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology* has a proud tradition of helping authors whose mother-tongue is not English to present their results. We have a duty then to see the English language used correctly but flexibly; I hope we do not appear to be too pedantic at times, but authors do use published papers as models in writing their own papers for the Journal and every paper we publish is a potential model. Authors should strive to publish models to follow and not be one of those other useful models—one that can always be held up as a bad example.

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