

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: CUT THE WAFFLE

No wonder our journalism lecturer used to regard us with a mixture of bewilderment and frustration. Many of us were in his class because we loved reading and books, and were looking to journalism as a way of combining these delights with making a living.

The trouble was that we couldn't write, though we thought we could. Somehow along the way of 12 years of schooling, we had come to equate good writing with an impressive vocabulary and complex sentence structures.

Our long-suffering lecturer had to take us back to basics. Learning that clever writing is simple writing was a painful process involving much red pen. Habits can be hard to break, and it was a while before we automatically began to use the active rather than passive voice and to keep sentences pithy.

It is a lesson that some people never have the chance to learn. Many areas of society, particularly academia, persist with the notion that the more clever you are, the more difficult you should be to understand.

This is especially evident in areas awash with the jargon of specialist knowledge - law, the financial and information technology sectors and medicine being the most obvious culprits. But there's little point having your own language if hardly anyone else can speak it. Unless, of course, you prefer it that way.

"If you're still using terms like cytotoxic lesion when you mean cancer, and if you can't resist abbreviations, eponyms, and Latin names for common illnesses, you may need help from the Plain English Campaign," the *British Medical Journal* noted recently.

Chrissie Maher, who launched the UK campaign against gobbledygook and jargon more than 20 years ago, sounds a remarkable woman. She had little formal education and could not read until she was in her mid teens. She became a consumer activist in the 1970s after founding a newspaper for semi-literate adults (and it was not *News of the World!*)

According to its website (<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>), the Campaign was born out of a project Maher launched to help people fill in forms after seeing two elderly women die because they couldn't understand an application form for housing benefits.

Dozens of hospitals, pharmaceutical companies and medical organisations have since joined the Campaign's Crystal Mark scheme which endorses documents that pass its plain English test. Campaign members who visited Australia last year said we are the most frequent visitors to their website, after the Brits and Americans.

The campaign, which also offers courses and seminars, has developed guides for writing medical information in plain English (available for free from the website) and for letters and reports. Simple tips include telling patients that "we will send a report to your doctor" rather than "a report will be sent to your doctor".

Its examples of what not to do are as entertaining as they are useful. Winner of the campaign's Golden Bull award is a US businessman, quoted in *Plastics and Rubber Weekly*:

"Traditional value chains and relationships in the plastics industry are under the threat of being deconstructed by e-commerce activities. New business models are emerging to more effectively manage the flow of mission-critical information among value chain participants, which in turn is creating new value propositions for customers."

Interestingly, the eight winners of the latest Plain English Awards all had some connection with health, and included publications on diabetes, blood transfusions, hearing loss and patient information leaflets. I know of a few health publications which wouldn't come close to winning such an award and I bet you do too.

But even those who practise the journalist's short, sharp jab must admit that obtuse or decorative language has its place. Sometimes the feeling conveyed by words is more important than the meaning.

Not that you'd want to rely on a poem for health advice.