With Respect to Patients

Patients have often been the Rodney Dangerfields of the medical literature, getting no respect. “The fool!” an exasperated Oliver Wendell Holmes exploded in 1858, describing, in the New England Journal of Medicine, a patient he considered block-headed. And in 1918, patients with yellow fever were described as “loathsome objects to be isolated from their kind”.

Arguably, patients have inched upward in status over the years, but less than 20 years ago study subjects were still occasionally referred to as “patient material”, and—incredibly—sick children were called “pediatric material”.

Language demeaning to patients persists, but it is subtler now, more nuanced. Take the word “manage”. Physicians who wouldn’t dream of introducing themselves as “Dr. Brown” while addressing their patients as “Mary” or “Bill” see nothing wrong with writing about managing their patients as “Mary” or “Bill” see nothing wrong with writing about managing their patients never said to report or describe as a whining ninny and the physician as dominant and wise. Why, for example, are patients never said to have or admitted having an infection, substituting the neutral “reported” for “admitted” eliminates the problem.

We copy editors and manuscript editors may have an advantage over physicians in this matter of respecting patients. Not only are we likely to be more sensitive to verbal nuance, but we may also find it easier to identify with patients and thus to recognize language that disparages or patronizes them.

“Do you ever have headaches?” Patient: “Yes.” Doctor (writing): “The patient complained of headache.”) “Instruct” is another word that tends to tip the status scales in the physician’s favor. Depending on context, the word inform or suggest can often be substituted.

When patients “admit” or “deny” certain practices—drug or alcohol use, homosexuality—a value judgment is hinted at that has no place in a scientific report. In the sentence “Only 2 percent of the women admitted having an abortion”, substituting the neutral “reported” for “admitted” eliminates the problem.

The Word Watcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. Recently retired from the New England Journal of Medicine, she can be reached by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The Word Watcher, 1347 Sudbury Road, Concord MA 01742; or e-mail: loviglio@ma.ultranet.com.

SOLUTION CORNER

Editor’s Note: To allow readers more time to submit solutions, responses in this column will now appear 2 issues after the questions were posed. Thus, please see the upcoming issue for responses to “A Question of Consent”. A new question appears below.

New Question: A Question of Reviewer Confidentiality

A member of a professional society becomes editor of its periodical. As editor, she has access to records on peer reviewers assigned to manuscripts in recent years, and she plans to consider these records when choosing reviewers. One problem, though: Authors are not to know the identity of reviewers of their manuscripts, but before assuming her current role, the editor had some articles published in the periodical. What should she do in this situation?

Edited by Della Mundy

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94612-3429; telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@ncalkaiperm.org.