

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

# Keep It Simple!

*Medical jargon may reinforce the mystique of the profession but it does nothing to improve doctor-patient communications and may even lead to the perception that we are hiding behind the lingo to cover up errors.*

What do the words ‘hepaticojejunostomy’, ‘percutaneous transhepatic cholangiogram’ and ‘subphrenic abscess’ have in common? These are all words that appeared without further explanation or simplification in a letter written by a surgeon to an irate relative who had complained about the care received by his father. Needless to say, the patient’s family was less than impressed by the perceived obfuscation (*obfuscate: to be unclear, evasive or confusing*) and I understand that the case has been escalated to the Singapore Medical Council.

Medical jargon is part of our culture and every profession has its own distinct set of phrases and words that builds a common identity and heritage. However, we should be mindful, in communicating with persons outside the clinical world we live in of the need to keep the English language, to borrow a term from the Speak Good English movement, “universally understood”. Our legal counterparts have recognised this for many years: The Singapore Academy of Law published a plain English guide to Latin expressions a few years ago and also conducted workshops on ‘drafting in plain English’. What was the aim? “Help the legal process in Singapore become more understandable to the lay public.”

There are at least three reasons why we should keep it simple. Firstly, the doctor-patient relationship is no longer paternalistic but partnership-based, and effective communication (meaning that the listener or reader understands

what we are trying to express) is absolutely vital to the relationship. It is not surprising that in Singapore as with the rest of the developed world, the majority of complaints against doctors relate to poor communication rather than accusations of professional negligence or misconduct. We need our patients to understand the care plan fully to improve compliance, especially in this age of chronic disease where patients play a much larger role in the success of their treatment.

Secondly, keeping it simple builds trust. Excessive use of bombastic terms (*bombastic: pompous/overblown*) may lead our patients to believe as in the case cited above that we have mis-managed care and are deliberately using complicated medical terms to cloud the issues and hide our failings. Trust cannot grow without mutual understanding.

Finally, if the relationship becomes so soured that litigation becomes necessary, we should have no illusions that the presiding judge will have little or no medical training and will likely take a dim view of inappropriate or excessive use of medical jargon.

Yes, it is important to be precise and be aware of the legal ramifications in communicating with patients or their relatives. But it is just as important to be understood. In addition to minimising the use of medical jargon, we can also make use of diagrams and flowcharts to help our patients understand the situation. Let’s keep it simple. ■



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