

Toward better writing

If pharmacists are to optimize patient care and advance the profession, they must have the skills to relay information effectively to patients and to other health care providers. In this issue of *AJHP*, Hobson et al.¹ and Kennicutt et al.² underscore the importance of one such skill, writing. Pharmacy students and their preceptors, they report, write many different kinds of documents. Although the investigators did not evaluate writing quality, it is obvious that the clearer and more convincing the writing, the more likely it is to achieve its purpose.

The editors of *AJHP* have the opportunity to evaluate hundreds of manuscripts yearly that have not been polished by professional editing. The authors of those papers probably have more confidence in their writing than do their nonpublishing colleagues and apply a higher writing standard to their submissions than to everyday documents like progress notes or departmental memoranda. Thus, *AJHP* manuscripts are probably better-than-average samples of pharmacist writing. The sad news is that many *AJHP* authors have much to learn about effective writing, and if their manuscripts represent a biased sample, the sadder conclusion is that serious writing deficiencies must be prevalent in typical documents produced by typical pharmacists. Furthermore, the deficiencies in manuscripts, and presumably in pharmacists' other written work, indicate more than a mere lack of facility with basic grammar and style. Pharmacists, of course, are not the only ones who struggle with writing; relatively few people in any profession have developed the skill to a very high level.

The happier news is that steps can be taken to improve pharmacists' writing. (Although only writing is discussed here, what improves writing will clearly improve oral communication as well.) Hobson et al. and Kennicutt et al. discuss educational approaches, especially those involving the pharmacy curriculum. Anyone faced with immediate writing assignments will find the advice of Zellmer³ hard to beat: Know your purpose, organize your thoughts, put yourself in the readers' position, use words carefully, and edit your work. Zellmer's suggestions can be adopted quickly and, when followed diligently, make writing much more effective. Many writing problems, though, are rooted not so much in neglect of these rules as in how authors view their topics. Writing, after all, reflects what authors think and know, and if the

thought processes and knowledge are deficient, so is the writing.

Descriptive writing is frequently illogical and disorganized because the subject itself—often the author's creation—shares the same flaws. Authors whose pharmacoeconomic analyses, surveys, or therapeutic interchange programs, for example, are poorly conceived almost never produce lucid reports of those endeavors. On the other hand, written descriptions of carefully planned and thoughtfully executed projects are generally (but not always) clear and cogent. Many authors seem able to apply the same intellectual processes that produce well-devised projects to their written descriptions. This association suggests that one way to improve pharmacists' writing is to enhance their powers of rational thinking. Perhaps instruction in logic and problem solving, in addition to English composition, should be required for admission to pharmacy school.

See also pages 58 and 63.

Imprecision, ambiguity, incorrect usage, and erroneous information are particularly common in discussions of highly technical topics (e.g., diagnosis, pathophysiology) and in reviews of complex issues. Pharmacists who write without adequate knowledge—those, for example, who use terms without knowing their exact definitions or full implications—not only risk being misunderstood but also jeopardize their credibility among readers better versed in the topic. Writing without sufficient understanding is sometimes unavoidable, as when a pharmacist must quickly produce a formulary recommendation for a product outside his or her field of expertise. To the extent possible, though, pharmacists should master a topic before writing about it.

Writing will continue to be a key skill for health professionals, and its improvement should be a high priority for pharmacists and pharmacy educators. Those charged with bringing about such improvement should realize that effective writing depends not only on attention to the principles of composition but also on a firm intellectual grasp of the topic at hand.

1. Hobson EH, Waite NM, Briceland LL. Writing tasks performed by doctor of pharmacy students during clerkship rotations. *Am J Health-Syst Pharm.* 2002; 59:58-62.
2. Kennicutt JD, Hobson EH, Briceland LL et al. On-the-job writing tasks of clerkship preceptors. *Am J Health-Syst Pharm.* 2002; 59:63-7.
3. Zellmer WA. How to become a better writer. *Am J Hosp Pharm.* 1984; 41:77-8. Editorial.