Personal Paper

Nice people with no manners

STEPHEN LOCK

British Medical Journal, 1978, 2, 1774-1775

"Dr Lush?"

"No, er Lock, actually; but you must be Dr Erridge, the postgraduate tutor."

"No, I'm Maclintick; Erridge has had to get his leave in before the end of the year (not that he can afford to go away, poor man—you can just see him from here, digging his vegetable garden). And I'm also sorry that you won't have any consultants at your talk: they've all had to go to an emergency meeting about the new contract."

"Well, never mind, we'll still have the GPs."

"Not any more, old boy, I'm afraid, since they abolished the seniority requirements, unless there's a top speaker or a really good lunch. Still, there will be some housemen and a sprinkling of students. You're lucky not to be talking at one of our evening meetings—it's damned difficult these days to get anybody to come back to the hospital after hours."

* * *

I'm not a very regular speaker, averaging, I suppose, about 20 talks a year. Almost always I have a good time: for somebody stuck in an office, whose telephone calls and letters are often devoted to complaints, getting out and talking is another way of finding out what people think about the product. You could say, with some justice, that the subjects of my talks are remote from doctors' everyday lives and I couldn't expect a large audience. I'd agree, and, anyway, a responsive tiny audience is much more fun than an indifferent large one. Nevertheless, other, more regular speakers (and those invaluable people who keep the system going, the secretaries of the postgraduate centres) confirm my feeling that much of the zing has gone out of postgraduate education. Even on a Sunday, a large audience will turn up for an MRCP or FRCS course or for a well-constructed seminar on a subject of everyday relevance—say, child psychiatry—but often, whatever his subject and however well he talks, an individual speaker will be lucky to have a turnout of 20, scattered throughout the middle and back rows of a largish lecture theatre, with the scene resembling Government and Opposition in an all-night session on a Scottish fisheries Bill.

To seek a single cause for all this, the facile answer is obvious: Barbara Castle, who did more to destroy and demoralise a great hospital service than any other individual or group. But another factor is important. The widespread postgraduate education movement is now over ten years old and its objectives need rethinking, aiming at relevance and acceptability rather than an overfull timetable.

It would be impertinent for me to say how this should be done. What I would urge is the need for a code of manners, because many speakers agree with me that these are not always what they were. So might I throw some suggestions into the debate?

(1) Tell the speaker his precise subject, audience, and length of time. Defining his role is particularly necessary when there are several speakers, yet only once in 15 years have I had a preliminary meeting with the other participants (appropriately enough, arranged before a conference held by the National Association of Clinical Tutors).

(2) Do turn up if you invite a speaker, or at least let him know beforehand that he will be met by a substitute. Arrange a parking space and see that a porter at the gate knows that he is coming.

(3) Start the meeting on time; together with two others, I once had to cool my heels for 40 minutes in a corridor while a confidential annual general meeting overran its schedule.

(4) Find out about your speaker's career. Few things are more embarrassing than having audibly to prompt a chairman about my real name, my past, and what I am doing now.

(5) Write the speaker a letter of thanks—and sign it. For roughly a third of my talks in the past two years I have had no bread-and-butter letter, while two of the thank-yous I did receive were duplicated and unsigned.

(6) Pay your speaker his expenses and try to estimate what these are. I was once handed an impossible form to fill in; among other things it dealt with cabin class by boat, tourist class by air, and two rates for rail and car travel (depending on advance authorisation). What should a speaker do with such a form? (My solution was the wastepaper basket.)

(7) Give your man something, but not a cheque: why not ask his secretary what he would like—the latest Iris Murdoch, say, or the cassettes of Karajan's *Salome*? Such a symbolic gesture is cheaper than most honoraria, and much more acceptable.

(8) Finally, if you are going to publish the proceedings of a meeting, give your contributors notice. When you have lectured from notes and slides there are few more depressing pieces of news than to be told at the end of a session that that association's standing orders require you to produce a written text.

* * *

"One of the sad things about incidents such as these is that the people involved are almost always normal, nice persons. Thoughtlessness is the problem. The application of a few simple rules would put the matter right. They could see that visiting speakers are to be asked how they intend travelling, their expected time of arrival, and would they like to be met. What are their eating arrangements? How are they to get back? Will they incur any expenses? It does not seem unreasonable to pose these questions and follow them up with any necessary action, when the speaker is prepared to make available his time and expertise, almost always for free."

This passage, written by an industrial safety officer in his professional journal this year, shows that the problems aren't confined to medicine. I've little idea of the prevalence of such thoughtlessness (I suspect about one case in five), but it is distributed throughout academe, learned societies, postgraduate centres, and undergraduate bodies.

But don't imagine that I don't enjoy my trips; I do, tremendously, virtually always—and in my mind I also maintain

an imaginary balance sheet, between the hour in Slagthorpe and the week in Killarney or Vancouver, all expenses paid. And most people are terribly polite and kind, putting you up in their own houses, arranging dinner parties, or taking you to the local beauty spots.

* * *

Lest you think my stories paranoid exaggerations, however, let me end with the true account of Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson, a very senior physician asked to speak to students on an MRCP course at a foremost medical establishment. Although he had been promised a parking space, the porter knew nothing about him and refused to allow his car into the hospital grounds;

however, caution had led him to arrive half an hour early, most of which he spent finding a parking meter. Nobody met him outside the lecture theatre, which was in darkness when he entered; fortunately, as he was silhouetted against the light he was recognised by the lecturer, who was one of his former registrars. "Ah, Sir Gavin," he called out, "come and sit here at the front." At the end of this lecture, Sir Gavin gave his; there was a lively discussion, which was ended by a cleaner saying that she needed the occupants out in order to clean up the room. By now it was 2 pm and no host had appeared. Sir Gavin made his way back to his car, and drove the 50 miles to his home, where his wife made him a cup of cocoa and some sandwiches. Four years later he has had neither a fee nor an acknowledgement of his services.

Very Short Report

Biology, blind men, and elephants

Newton watched an apple fall and discovered the Law of Gravity (A). Biologists would attack such a problem more scientifically. A typical scientific approach would be as follows.

Introduction

Apples would seem to appear to fall to the ground.^{1-50 52 54 57} This suggests the possibility that there is some property of apples which might result in this phenomenon. It is well known that apples falling from a height have apparent changes in tissue turgor pressure.^{51 55 56-80} This might well reflect changes in intracellular water and electrolyte losses. It, therefore, appeared reasonable to determine the relationship between the apple's fall, its tissue turgor pressure, and the intracellular electrolyte content.

Materials, methods, and results

A total of 500 apples were randomly selected from an orchard in the State of Washington with another 500 from Wisconsin as controls. The apples were stratified by colour, number of seeds, worm content, and baseline tissue turgor pressure and intracellular electrolytes measured by methods we have previously described.^{53 81-200} Each apple was numbered and randomly placed in brown bags (obtained through the courtesy of Cheatem Markets). The bags were then dropped from 1, 10, 20, and 100 feet (respectively 30, 300, 600, and 3000 cm) by an investigator who did not know their contents. Post-drop tissue turgor pressure and electrolyte concentrations were then remeasured by another method we have previously described.^{53 201-430}

Results were analysed by the χ^2 , Student's test, Wilcoxon, covariant analysis, and multiple linear regression techniques with appropriate strata. There was a highly significant difference in the worm content of red apples as opposed to green ones ($P < 0.05$). Furthermore, green apples with more than 10 worms and less than five seeds showed a much greater decrease in post-fall tissue turgor if they were from Wisconsin than if they were from Washington State ($P < 0.00001$). By analysis of covariance and multiple linear regression, there was an almost linear relationship between height of drop and decrease in tissue turgor pressure (figure). When corrected for crush artifact, no differences could be observed for pre- and post-drop intracellular electrolyte concentrations. All apples that were dropped, fell. Consequently we could not determine whether the change in turgor pressure was statistically associated with falling. Nevertheless, the inadequate number of drops may have led to a substantial type two error; in a more extensive trial, it is expected that a sufficient number of apples would rise to actually determine this effect.

Comment

We plan to repeat the study with a larger number of apples and also measure apple shelf life before and after dropping them. Of course, there will be much criticism of our methodology—"the investigator failed to stratify by the type of apple—for example, Golden Delicious

vs Beverly Hill vs Pippin, Roman." "The apples should have been allowed to drop from trees." "In our study¹⁻²⁰ we found a significant correlation with temperature and season of the year—the current investigation cannot be interpreted without such data."

But once the criticism dies down, there will be a flurry of activity, investigators repeating the study with pears, prunes, pumpkins, and watermelons to show the generality of the results. The original investigators will spend six months a year on speaking tours in both the scientific and lay communities. Grant money will flow in vast rivers from both public sources and private charitable foundations. A Nobel prize should be forthcoming. In his dotage, the author should be interviewed for his political and social opinions to which he was more than entitled by virtue of his previous achievement.

Statistics is not truth. Statistical science exists only because we don't know what questions to ask of nature or because we haven't devised appropriate ways of testing our hypotheses.

But, while it is quite true that this type of science doesn't provide any satisfying answers, it does produce all that marvellous data that we all like so much. Also, it puts bread on the table of the researcher. So, with that, I must return to my laboratory to predict elephants by examining their tails (B).

A Newton, Sir Isaac, personal communication.

B Aesop, personal communication.

University of California, Los Angeles, USA

BERRIL YUSHOMERSKI YANKELOWITZ, MD, physician