one placed various types of pot so as to take best advantage of this (or, at least, to minimise this disadvantage). We agreed, as the dirty grey dawn appeared, that tunnel ovens would be a great improvement.

Later in life I found sitting up with a biscuit oven to be similar to being the all night casualty officer in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. It was boring and exciting by turns; too hot or too cold; the atmosphere depressing or evocative, according to your state of mind. The hood and hovel were stark, blackened brick, lit only by the orange glow of 12 hungry firemouths. A cold moaning draught swept round the restricted space between the hood of the bottle oven and the circular beehive of the kiln itself, pulled by the throbbing, fiery furnace within. This monster, now that its fires were clear, ate coal at a prodigious rate, but we didn't dare fill a firemouth full for fear of drawing the balance of heat unevenly towards it. We sweated in front of the fires, but crept shivering back within seconds of stepping into the night air. We frowned and fumbled with the fireman's long trial rod, trying to lift Bullers' rings cleanly from the outermost saggars through a peephole, wrapping wet towels around our forearms against the yellow cone of heat blowing out of the small aperture. We worried and waited for measurements, exactly as, in later years, I would await the full dilatation of the cervix in the labour suite at Simpson's. The same responsibility lay with me at that moment, tempered by the same excitement of assisting in the final act of creation.

As the unwashed dawn began to shroud the surrounding buildings in a decent curtain of mist the picket gate across the works yard banged open. Eli, the boilerman, always first in, came across to greet us with a small parcel wrapped in an old *Evening Sentinel*. Inside lay half a pound of bacon, half a pound of cheese, and a dozen oatmeal pancakes. "Potters' breakfast," said Dennis, polishing his shovel, already shiny from scraping its way through 20 tons of coal. "It don't taste reet from a pan," said Eli, and he cooked our breakfast on Dennis's shovel, laid on the coals. He was right. Potters' breakfast never tasted so good.

At eight we shut the dampers and closed the firedoors on each of the 12 firemouths. Dennis went home to bed while I settled into another busy day on the potbank. By six in the evening the last Seger cones had drooped, finally admitting that they had had enough heat. At eight the following morning I gingerly removed the first two bricks from the clammings, the temporary wall across the entrance to the bottle oven.

A cold wind whistled into the hot kiln, causing a thousand small, sharp pings to take up a thousand variable rhythms. To their staccato notes Dennis added a duller slower bass as he "punched" the oven, clearing the clinker from the firebars with a heavy steel rod that resembled the tillerpost of a trawler. By now the pottery inside the oven would be too cool for the fly ash to cling and stain.

"Never mind the credit; take the profit"

We pinned a cardboard notice to the factory gates: "Biscuit oven emptying [sic] on Thursday." One of the wittier graffiti artists corrected this, adding, "The P is silent, as in bath." At seven thirty on a cold, foggy morning our gang of casual labourers materialised. They were all freshly showered, straight from the night shift at Florence Colliery, but in their working gear they looked like a gang of pirates. They knew all about the irregular circumstances of this oven and shamelessly turned it to account by declaring it to be a "hot oven." There was nothing for it but to be first up the ladder inside the kiln and to place a thermometer atop the highest bung of saggars, 20 feet above the floor. They were right. I hadn't cooled the thing properly. The alternatives were bullying (not this bunch of toughs), persuasion (no, they'd got me and they knew it), or bribery, and the latter course was obvious. Twelve men drank 12 gallons of draught ale in the course of the forenoon and they had everything laid on the biscuit warehouse floor by one o'clock. They called me "gaffer" and a "gent," so I knew they thought that I was an easy touch. Why should that matter? In securing my objective I had demonstrated one of Carnegie's aphorisms: "Never mind the credit; take the profit."

Seven years after entering the pottery industry I realised that the senior jobs in our business were passing to members of one family and that this process would continue until the cuckoos had displaced my father, my brother, and me. The difficult trading times that followed the Suez crisis destroyed my father's determination to risk his capital on an independent venture and nearly destroyed my own self confidence. Success in industry comes easily when your father is a senior director of the firm, but it is not clean won and lays no foundations. For the sake of my self esteem I needed to succeed in something desperately difficult. Medicine offered the most daunting challenge that I could imagine, but beyond the struggle lay the greatest prize that life could offer—independence.

After dinner speaking

Clifford Hawkins

After dinner speaking can make or mar an evening's enjoyment. Sometimes when the wine and good food have created a climax of conviviality a dull silence falls and the jovial atmosphere disappears as the speaker delivers the speech that has cost him restless nights in its conception and anorexia during the meal. Occasionally the victim makes a speech that holds the audience in interest and mirth: a fine ending to a meal and a good prelude to the rest of the evening.¹ Similarly, a leader in this journal once stated that "after dinner speakers are mostly as dull as dish-water. . . . Apart from their intrinsic demerits, after dinner speeches prevent the diners moving around to meet old friends over the port. They all get stuck in their places and opposite the

same old faces."² Listeners are a captive audience and the speaking is open ended with no time limit or chairman to call a halt.

The invitation "to say a few words after dinner" can be an ordeal for those unaccustomed to public speaking. They do not wish to make fools of themselves or let their hosts down. They prepare the talk and perhaps play it back on tape—a depressing experience—but believe that the outcome on the evening is unpredictable. Then comes the call to begin, which is especially alarming when announced by the thunderous decibels of the crimson jacketed toastmaster on a formal occasion. The speaker stands alone, a pinnacle among a sea of expectant faces, and may have to begin while

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waitresses flit around serving coffee or with noises coming from the adjacent kitchen. Afterwards he sits down with relief but earlier enjoyment may have been spoilt by apprehension. Perhaps beta blockers might prevent this, but no controlled trial has been done. A small dose of alcohol helps to avoid anorexia and alleviate anxiety—too much may be disastrous. Hence the story of the eminent lord who, when called upon by the toastmaster to speak, rose to his feet. His lips trembled but no sound emerged and he slumped back into his seat; the president then thanked him for his heroic effort.

The professional as well as the amateur speaker may be worried about this form of communication. A colleague who lectures regularly was concerned about having to speak after a formal dinner when he received an honorary degree from a university. And a distinguished professor of medicine, internationally known for his research, said to me that after dinner speeches should be given by those who are gifted. Others should never speak, but there were some like himself who have to speak and need advice. He suggested this article.

A good organiser appreciates the needs of the speaker and briefs him or her clearly about the occasion: whether the audience will be medical or mixed with lay people and spouses, whether there will be the one speech or several, and if a toast will be required. There is a good case for limiting speeches to two. Eight minutes or thereabouts is the usual time limit; this custom originated from the ancient livery companies in London, guilds who derived their name from the distinctive dress (livery) adopted by their members in the fourteenth century.³ But 20 minutes or longer may be expected from the solo guest speaker.

Having to speak and not read

Speaking rather than reading from a script is a *sine qua non* and the difference between the spoken and written word is well illustrated by after dinner speaking. As Ruth Holland noted, when reviewing the collection of after dinner speeches given by Alistair Cooke, a master orator, "What is swallowed easily after good food and wine may be harder to take in cold print. The reader, even in bed or a deckchair, is more critical than a member of an invited audience; you have to do without the good fellowship and laughter, the interplay between speaker and listeners; you miss the nuances of tone of voice, change of emphasis, gestures, and facial expressions."⁴ And, of course, the speaker must be heard, so if the audience is big addressing someone at the back is the best plan—perhaps asking for a hand to be raised if unable to hear. A microphone makes this unnecessary but is not without technical problems, and the sound may vanish if the speaker turns away from a fixed microphone to address the president or knocks it over with a dramatic gesture.

Speaking after dinner is more difficult than presenting a paper at a scientific meeting. Without the hard data of research, ideas and humour have to be concocted for an audience whose interests are often unknown and diverse. However amusing, the speech should have a core of seriousness, a theme or message, and be designed for the occasion. It should be loose in texture, as the need to extemporise may arise, such as referring to something said by a previous speaker or answering an interjection.

Notes are useful for moral support and as reminders. They may be written on record cards, kept as simple as possible, made legible as they will be further away than the customary lectern, and ringed in case they are dropped. The cards are placed unobtrusively behind a bowl of flowers or the glasses ready to be drunk after finishing; or held in the hand if small. Even Sir Derrick

Dunlop, a most polished and experienced speaker, believed in having notes. Once, he told me, he was delivering a memorial address in Edinburgh Cathedral without notes when he had the appalling experience of the mind suddenly going blank.

Is humour always necessary?

Humour is not every one's forte, and a problem is the feeling—almost the tradition—that the speech must be amusing. One result is forced humour and, at the worst, a series of worn out and irrelevant jokes some of which may be risqué and likely to embarrass listeners. Miles Kington listed the top ten phrases used by speakers and gave the winning phrase as "In this context, I am reminded of the story." Others were "An anecdote comes to mind" and "Which reminds me of an incident" and he suggested that an after dinner speech should be brief, witty, and clean.⁵ Jokes are useful to illustrate serious ideas, and humour should be natural and, if possible, original and unpredictable and appropriate to the audience. Shakespeare understood this for, as Viola remarked in *Twelfth Night*, "This fellow's wise enough to play the fool and to do that well craves a kind of wit: he must observe their mood on whom he jests, the quality of persons, and the time."

Humour should spring from the speaker's own experience rather than the "funny story" passed on from other speakers or perhaps from books. Keeping a file of personal anecdotes and humorous experiences ensures originality. But excellent speeches are made without a single joke; some of the best are those that are casually witty but basically serious. Humour, like the quality of mercy, must never be strained.

The speech to the guests is an arduous assignment especially when several distinguished people have been invited. Sir Francis Walshe once wrote, "The toast of the guests is always the nadir of after-dinner oratory. It would be a healthy custom if every proposer of this toast who started on the Who's Who tack were swiftly and silently removed from the room. Nothing less will save us from these unimaginative bores."⁶ Nevertheless, something usually has to be said, so research may be necessary such as finding biographical details and selecting interesting facts, or telephoning someone—for example, a secretary—who can provide a personal anecdote. The speech for the guests carries the difficulty of the speaker not knowing what is going to be said beforehand so must be partly spontaneous; it is always helpful to take up a point from the previous speaker and a *short* talk is welcomed as a forerunner to diners circulating.

There are occasions, such as the Prime Minister speaking at a banquet at the Guildhall, when a serious speech of length is expected. This applies to the annual staff dinner when the main speaker is the chairman of the medical executive committee—a person who has toiled all the year on his or her colleagues' behalf and naturally wishes to inform them about the year's activities and "state of the union." This can be tedious and prevent members who seldom see each other from meeting; they slink exhausted home to bed. The chairman is usually a person well liked by his colleagues who are pleased and grateful to let him run their affairs; so there is seldom need for a long and detailed dissertation, and handouts could be used to illustrate financial matters. Certain themes could be chosen, perhaps an issue over which the chairman has striven for but in vain, as well as successful outcomes.

The annual dinner of a medical society is often followed by a talk or lecture lasting 30 to 40 minutes. The custom is that it should be both entertaining and educational in its widest sense. In practice it is as unpredictable as a weather forecast. For example, a

well known lawyer, whose profession has a reputation for eloquence, was invited, but his talk was humdrum, and a distinguished surgeon, whose conversation sparkles with wit and culture, brought slides of a lecture that he had resurrected for the occasion, and the subject was neither uplifting nor conducive to good digestion. Perhaps speakers are not always told what is wanted or it may be an impossible task for an expert to present the subject in a tempting way suitable for lay as well as medical listeners. Receptivity for molecular biology is diminished after a large meal, particularly if the subject is pitched at the same level as addressing the Royal Society.

Hazards for the speaker

A modest start endears the speaker to the audience and is usually sincere but must be put carefully. A risky way of invoking "the weakness of the chosen vessel theme" is to begin with "Goodness only knows why I am making this speech" or "No doubt you must be hoping that the old bore will shut up and sit down." The morale of even the most self-confident person will be disturbed if this is received in sullen silence perhaps broken by a few muttered "hear, hears" instead of laughter.

Another hazard is to be the last speaker. To be called upon at a late hour when several long speeches have been made is a nightmare. For, as Norman Birkett, the distinguished judge, wrote, "Many of the diners are hurrying from the hall before the speaker rises so that they can catch the last train home, and there is a general air of having-had-enough-speaking-for-one-night abroad." He quoted the solution of another judge, Lord Hewart, to whom this happened. He told his audience that, fearing this eventuality, he had prepared two speeches. One speech was a short speech; the other was a little longer and he was considering what he should do. After keeping the listeners in suspense for some moments he announced that he had

decided to give them both; here the audience uttered a long, collective sigh. He then went on, "I will begin with the short one which was 'Thank you,' and I will also give you the longer one which was 'Thank you very much'." He then sat down to the longest applause of the evening.⁷

Some believe that good speaking, like good writing, comes easily, but, for most mortals, hard work is needed for both. This certainly applied to Richard Asher, physician, writer, and a scintillating talker. And I once looked forward to enjoying the company of Dr T F Fox, the distinguished editor of *Lancet*, whom I had arranged to entertain before his speech at our annual medical society dinner. But he apologised and spent the 30 minutes or more with his head buried in his notes. Yet when he spoke it seemed as if it were an impromptu talk. Mark Twain said that it usually takes no more than three weeks to prepare an impromptu speech. No doubt the high standard of many of the speeches given today is due to a similar devotion.

The ideal speech should be friendly, slightly discursive, suitable for the occasion, and to some extent lighthearted to avoid destroying postprandial conviviality. Lack of confidence is an asset and the best speakers get nervous beforehand. The worst speeches are given by those who suffer from over confidence and enjoy listening to the cadence of their own voices. Whether invited as a guest speaker because of his or her distinction or because of a duty to speak due to the office held, the speaker is likely to address an amiable and sympathetic audience whose receptivity has been increased by the food and wine. But the speech should finish before the listeners' interest has started to wane.

1 Anonymous. In England now. A running commentary by peripatetic correspondents. *Lancet* 1954;ii:1074.

2 Anonymous. After dinner [Editorial]. *Br Med J* 1958;ii:904.

3 Wood M. *The art of speaking*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971.

4 Holland R. After dinner cookebook. *Br Med J* 1986;293:1010.

5 Kington M. *The Independent* 1987 June 30: 14.

6 Walshe F. After dinner. *Br Med J* 1958;ii:1039-40.

7 Birkett N. On saying a few words after dinner. *Punch* 1959 November 2:12-4.

On course for being a medical journalist

Daragh Lawless

"Harvey," said the amiably laconic editor of *BMA News Review*, "is one of the few doctors I know who may be rightly called a real hack." Thus Tim Albert, himself the editor, in his left hand a lighted cigar, in his right the introductory notes to *BMA News Review's* second weekend course in medical journalism on 25 to 27 March. The venue was the attractively appointed Green Man Hotel in Harlow. The sponsors were Smith, Kline and French of Tagamet fame. The course fee was a snip at £35 all in for BMA members and £50 for non-members. "Harvey" was Dr Harvey Marcovitch, consultant paediatrician and medical journalist. Also on the winning side were Helen Parker, trainee subeditor, and American journalist and former subeditor, Jayne Rice. But chiefly there was . . .

Ourselves. Twelve assorted medics, romantic fugitives from the clinical round, and in all as blithe a band of bedouins as ever broke bread together. The menu ranged from simple writing, news, and feature writing to subediting and press conferences. We had been told to bring an 800 word feature to be worked on as the weekend progressed and to this end were spliced into three bales of four with Albert, Rice, and Marcovitch as tutors. Two hours and a buffet supper later our small detachment was moored comfortably alongside our tutor, Jayne Rice.

We read out our (surprisingly topical) features. Jayne pondered these in turn, emphasising the importance of a good opening paragraph to engage the reader's attention. Titles and standfirsts were discussed. A standfirst is the line or two between the title and the text proper. It identifies the writer and gives a hint of what is to come. The trick is to engage the attention without giving the game away. The editor or "sub" usually chooses these but it's useful to think of your own from the outset.

Sentence construction was scrutinised. Teacher said the active form was better than the passive, in journalism at any rate. The first sentence of this paragraph should thus read "Jayne scrutinised sentence construction." She advocated using short not long words and emphasised the importance of direct expression, a point that Tim Albert took up the next day. Thus "Jayne looked at the way we'd written our sentences."

We explored the idea of passivity. Using the passive form can shade the meaning of a sentence. It leaves unsaid meanings and implications hovering in the mind. In the same way the subjunctive mood (in English "would," "might," "may") leaves an aura of uncertainty or unfulfilled longing. Put another way, it leaves room for doubt, which direct construction does not. In similar vein are trailing or lingering subordinate

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