Letters to the Editor

Crotchets (1999)

J.W. HURST: *Clin Cardiol* 1999;22:611–613

To the Editor:

I particularly enjoy articles relating to the use of language and consequently took customary pleasure in Dr. Hurst's special article. Let me, however, respectfully offer a "second opinion" regarding some of his "crotchets."

There are many forms of language—baby talk, badinage among friends and colleagues, formal oral, friendly written, formal written, etc. Dr. Lubell's crotchets include a disagreement with the use of the term *cabbage*. I feel that use of such a term is appropriate in informal banter among colleagues, though would agree that is not acceptable in discussions with, or in the presence of, patients.

He also takes issue with the term *on digoxin*. Please allow me to demur once again. One can correctly be *on digoxin* or *on television* or *on a roll* or *on a diet* without implications of actually physically sitting or standing on that object.

Internal medicine does not imply that there must be an opposite *external medicine*. *Outlook* does not require an opposite *inlook*, *oversight* not an *undersight*, *overlook*, not *underlook*, *undermine*, not *overmine*, etc. Though *upscale* is the opposite of *downscale*, *upbeat* is not the opposite of *downbeat*.

Data, which Dr. Hurst says is *plural* (I assume he means plural) is accepted as the singular in my dictionary. *Data* is often used as a synonym for information. *Once the data is in* is acceptable, as is the singular implication in the phrase *very little data exists*.

We must also remember what crotchety denotes—*capriciously stubborn or eccentric*.¹

The beauty of the English language is its evolving adaptability and expressiveness, its vocabulary and meanings ever enlarging to meet our needs to communicate better and with greater descriptive power.

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Reference

1. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992

Author's reply:

I am pleased that Dr. Carl Steeg enjoyed my article "Crotchets (1999)" that included crotchets sent to me by Drs. Lubell and Perloff. He has every right to offer a "second opinion" about five of the crotchets. However, he cannot disagree with them because crotchets are personal irritants; they may not irritate him, or anyone else, but they bother us.

I know there are different forms of language and agree with the list provided by Dr. Steeg. I thought, because I was writing for a medical journal about medical subjects, that the reader would surmise that I was addressing crotchets in the use of medical language. I agree with Dr. Lubell that the word *cab-*

bage should not be used for coronary bypass surgery. Words used repeatedly away from patients may be used inadvertently in the presence of patients.

I also agree with Dr. Lubell's crotchet *on digoxin* although the use of the word *on* is not a crotchet for Dr. Steeg. Every time I hear the words I conjure up an image of someone sitting on a digoxin pill. The image causes me no pain. In fact, the image makes me smile. I suspect, after our friendly banter, that Dr. Steeg will visualize someone sitting on a pill of digoxin each time he hears the words *on digoxin*.

I agree with Dr. Perloff's concern about the words *internal medicine*. Dr. Steeg, being a pediatrician, may not know the trouble the two words have caused physicians. Because the words are not sufficiently descriptive to describe what internists do, they are bothersome to some people, but not to all people. Convention holds that *external* is the opposite of *internal*. I know, and I am sure Dr. Perloff knows that many of the words Dr. Steeg cites do not have opposites. Dr. Perloff did not discuss all words; he discussed the word *internal* and the opposite of internal is *external*.

The following sentences are reproduced from my dictionary.¹

Data should not be used with a singular verb, as in *the data is inconclusive*; it is by origin a Latin plural (the singular is *datum*) and should be used with a plural verb, *the data are inconclusive*.

As Dr. Steeg writes, *data* is often used as a synonym for information. This is a crotchet for me because *facts*, in my view, is a more accurate synonym for *data* than *information*. *Information* should be used with a singular verb. Note that the word *information* itself can either be plural or singular.

In know there are exceptions to all rules but it still shakes me a little to hear or read "*The Birds is coming*." It is acceptable only when I realize that *The Birds* is a motion picture coming to the neighborhood theater.

I believe, in almost all instances, the word *data* should be used with a plural verb. I suggest that the words *once the data is in* provided by Dr. Steeg should be changed to *once the data are in* and the words *very little data exists* should be changed to *few data exist*.

I apologize for the typographical error, which is another crotchet for me and Dr. Steeg. Although the manuscript was reviewed by three people the error was not detected.

I agree with Dr. Steeg's last sentence. It is beautifully written and I admire his linguistic ability. But, if we accept his advice, we will say *the data is in and it indicates that the patient was on digoxin before she had a cabbage*. The sentence does not, in my opinion, enhance the beauty of the language, improve communication, or reveal greater descriptive power.

Recognizing Dr. Steeg's interest in crotchets, I invite him to send me a few and permit me to include them in my annual essay on the subject.

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Reference

1. *Oxford American Dictionary*, page 161. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1980