

# RES MEDICA

Journal of the Royal Medical Society



## Medical Pudder

C. Mawdsley  
M.B., Ch.B., M.R.C.P., M.R.C.P.Ed.

### Abstract

Ivor Brown first used the term pudder to describe writing which has a tendency to say what has to be said in as complicated a way as possible. Here is a well known piece of medical pudder: “Experiments are described which demonstrate that in normal individuals the lowest concentration in which sucrose can be detected by means of gustation differs from the lowest concentration in which sucrose (in the amount employed) has to be ingested in order to produce a demonstrable decrease in olfactory acuity and a noteworthy conversion of sensations interpreted as a desire for food into sensations interpreted as satiety associated with ingestion of food.”

Copyright Royal Medical Society. All rights reserved. The copyright is retained by the author and the Royal Medical Society, except where explicitly otherwise stated. Scans have been produced by the Digital Imaging Unit at Edinburgh University Library. Res Medica is supported by the University of Edinburgh's Journal Hosting Service: <http://journals.ed.ac.uk>

ISSN: 2051-7580 (Online) ISSN: 0482-3206 (Print)  
Res Medica is published by the Royal Medical Society, 5/5 Bristo Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9AL

Res Medica, Summer 1968, 6(2): 17, 19-22  
doi: [10.2218/resmedica.v6i2.840](https://doi.org/10.2218/resmedica.v6i2.840)

# MEDICAL PUDDER

C. MAWDSLEY, M.B., Ch.B., M.R.C.P., M.R.C.P.Ed.

*Northern General Hospital and The Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh*

Ivor Brown first used the term pudder to describe writing which has a tendency to say what has to be said in as complicated a way as possible. Here is a well known piece of medical pudder:

“Experiments are described which demonstrate that in normal individuals the lowest concentration in which sucrose can be detected by means of gustation differs from the lowest concentration in which sucrose (in the amount employed) has to be ingested in order to produce a demonstrable decrease in olfactory acuity and a noteworthy conversion of sensations interpreted as a desire for food into sensations interpreted as satiety associated with ingestion of food.”

Pudder is an acquired and an infectious disease. Children do not suffer from it. Below is an extract, quoted by Cowers, from an essay written by a ten year old child:

“The cow is a mammal. It has six sides, right, left, an upper and a below. At the back it has a tail on which hangs a brush. With this it sends the flies away so that they do not fall into the milk. The head is for the purpose of growing horns and so that the mouth can be somewhere. The horns are to butt with and the mouth is to moo with. Under the cow hangs the milk. It is arranged for milking. The cow has a fine sense of smell; one can smell it far away. This is the reason for the fresh air in the country. The cow does not eat much but what it eats, it eats twice so that it gets enough. When it is hungry it moos

and when it says nothing it is because its inside is all full up with grass.”

This description is not only simple but it is stylish, Matthew Arnold says that the secret of style “is to have something to say and to say it as clearly as you can.” This is achieved by the child’s essay, but not by the earlier passage from the medical journal.

The reasons which convert people from plain English in childhood to the pudder of published work are worth analysing, and I would like to discuss some of them.

## JARGON

The word jargon is sometimes used, as a synonym for pudder, to deride poor style. When its meaning is that of a technical language peculiar to a particular job, jargon need not be a term of abuse. Bob Hope uses it in this sense when he says that “virus” is medical jargon for “I don’t know”. Medical jargon is useful when it serves as a convenient shorthand for ideas which otherwise would need long-winded descriptions. Often, however, words of jargon are used to confuse, rather than help, understanding. Sir George Pickering quoted this sentence from a paper: “Chlorothiazide induced natriuresis, kaluresis, chloruresis and bicarbonate excretion”. He suggested it might be better to say, “Chlorothiazide increased the excretion of sodium, potassium, chloride and bicarbonate”. This is as accurate, and certainly it is clearer to the reader who is not an expert on renal function.

Dr. M. H. Pappworth compiles lists of new

jargon terms. He estimates that three new words are added to our medical vocabulary each day and questions the need for such examples as ephebiatrics, ataralgia, pulhstibs and hyposthenuria. Without a deep knowledge of all the specialised branches of medicine we cannot know how many of these new constructions are worthwhile. We can only hope that natural selection will cause the unnecessary ones to be discarded before we are compelled to learn them. If possible, new diseases should be described in familiar terms, as happened when the burning feet syndrome was recognized and named. The disorder to which this phrase is applied might easily have been given some invented label like phlogeropodia. Writer's cramp aptly depicts a common disability which, recently, has been called mogigraphia. This new jargon is mysterious and hence frightening to patients and has nothing to recommend it. Attempts to replace the clear and commonplace knee jerk by a patellar reflex, should be resisted.

When words of medical jargon are used as a form of shorthand they must be clearly defined or jargon becomes gibberish. Kahn talks of psychopaths and says he means:

"Those discordant personalities which, on the causal side are characterised by quantitative peculiarities in the impulse, temperament and character strata and in their unified goal-striving activity are impaired by quantitative deviations and foreign variations."

Most of us would agree with Macdonald Critchley when he suggests that this definition borders on the meaningless. This type of garbled explanation tends to bring the whole concept into disrepute, and leads to the flip-pant alternative definition of a psychopath as any person whom a psychiatrist dislikes. This at least is brief and is easily remembered even though it may be inaccurate.

Jargon expressions sometimes acquire such authority that they become more important than the processes they describe. An able candidate at a recent examination was involved in a discussion about optic atrophy. The examiner would not accept the candidate's use of the terms consecutive and secondary optic atrophy, and insisted on his own usage. Both men were talking about an optic disc which looked abnormally pale. When a pale disc has sharply defined edges most people say that this is primary optic atrophy. Secondary

optic atrophy usually refers to a pale disc with blurred margins. Some people, however, subdivide this second group into secondary and consecutive optic atrophy; but the picture is confused since equally eminent authorities use these two terms differently. One man's 'consecutive' is another's 'secondary'. Some use all three of these labels; others manage with two. The appearances to which these terms are applied, arise from one pathological process; optic nerve fibres have been lost and have been replaced by glial tissue. A meaningful discussion could be held about the possible causes of this change in a particular patient. To quarrel about ill-defined jargon is profitless and is more appropriate to legal argument than medical science. Râle is another widely used term whose meaning varies from place to place. Effort is often wasted in debates about jargon and thought thus deflected away from the reality which the jargon imperfectly describes.

Badly defined or unnecessary jargon is one cause of pudder.

#### PRESTIGE

Pudder is often produced by attempts to gain prestige. The tendency to dress up ideas in long rumbling words of high prestige value is illustrated by this quotation from an American journal:

"The pragmatic verity of the physiological concept of disease is established by its usefulness: with functional integrity our goal the no-thoroughfare of unattainable structural integrity leaves us no longer at a therapeutic non-plus."

This is nonsense, disguised by words like pragmatic, verity and integrity which produce a glow of approval when spoken or written. The passage illustrates the ability of words to arouse emotion as well as to express facts. What Thouless calls the emotional tone of words is exemplified in the statements: "I am firm". "You are stubborn". "He is pig headed". All three sentences say that the subject is not easily influenced; but they arouse widely different emotions. Emotionally loaded words are essential to poetry and to advertising but do not help clear thinking in medicine. Thus, when a psychotherapist recently referred to the treatment of depression by drugs he said that this was "putting the patient into a chemical straitjacket". This is a condemnation based on the overtones of disapproval attached to his "straitjacket" meta-

phor. It says nothing rational about the use of drugs.

Trobridian islanders used to believe that words were more potent than the things they symbolized; words had magical powers. Even in civilized societies similar beliefs are sometimes manifest. In 1937 a New York Senator voted against a Bill which sought to prevent the spread of syphilis by publicising its effects. He did so because he believed that seeing and hearing the word syphilis would corrupt children. Less extreme but similar attitudes influence medical writing. Fowler's principles are generally accepted. It is better, he says, to use the familiar rather than the unfamiliar; to use the short word rather than the long and to use the Saxon, rather than the Latin or Greek, word. We accept these principles but regularly use such words as defaecate, micturate and copulate in our writings. These words are longer and flabbier than their four-letter Saxon equivalents. The longer words have a higher prestige value, but more importantly, the short ones are tainted. In 1958 Eric Partridge in his book "Origins" disguises the two most familiar four-letter words with asterisks and says that, "outside medical and other learned papers they cannot be printed in full". They are now often printed in full but not, then or now, in medical papers. The stigma of filth is attached to words in an irrational and capricious way. People who shrink from the vulgar will happily use 'poppycock' as a form of respectable, gentle swearing. But poppycock derives from the Danish 'pappekak' which means soft dung. It is said that terse Saxon expressions are no longer used in learned writings because they sound ugly; yet 'folk' and 'luck', similar in sound to one "obscene" word, are not usually thought to be ugly. It is an emotional revulsion which bans the use of 'dirty' words and this is eventually passed on to the various euphemisms which are used as substitutes. Euphemisms are suppressing more and more blunt, clear and vigorous words. In America even arm-pit is now considered distasteful and 'under-arm' is being used instead. It is too late to restore many pithy Anglo-Saxon terms to respectability but there seems no reason why words like eructate and expectorate should forever supplant belch and spit in medical writing.

Closely related to euphemism is cuphuism, an artificially elegant style of writing, which is another agent in the search for prestige and in the production of pudger. Here is an

American physician displaying his bejewelled and Byzantine prose:

"The neurologist with all of his knowledge of minutest anatomy was for years, 'like the man who stood on the bridge at midnight', not dreaming the dreams of a Longfellow but soliloquizing after the manner of the cynic on the vanity of all earthly things when the voice of the syphilographer first cried out from the darkness 'Fear not for I am always with you'."

This passage has been heaped together from a collection of clichés. It is a poor attempt to enliven descriptive writing by using the "purple patch" technique of imaginative literature. Hybrid writing like this is usually ugly. T. H. Huxley condemns it. He says that the only beauties that the scientific writer has any right to create are those of orderly composition and verbal clarity.

Somerset Maugham in his writing aimed at lucidity, simplicity and euphony, in that order of importance. He said that men of science often wrote obscurely because they had never taken the trouble to write clearly. The clarity of medical writing is also clouded by a pre-occupation with prestige. In a recent paper the author wants to tell us that his patient was fed, but what he says is, 'alimentation was maintained'. This is not simple, not lucid and certainly is not euphonious. Long words are not necessarily confusing. They are sometimes essential to convey precise meanings and occasionally help to achieve euphony. But 'alimentation was maintained' exemplifies an inept and unnecessary use of long words and betrays both a lack of thought and a desire for prestige.

The preference for the rotund rather than the plain leads to a wrong use of words as in: "It is anticipated that further application of this method will yield much more useful information". Anticipate here is used not in the correct sense of forestalling an event but as an imposing substitute for expect. A. P. Herbert says that "John and Jane anticipated marriage" is not likely to be interpreted as, "John and Jane expect to be married".

The prestige and polish of polysyllables have been added to our titles. Children's doctors are paediatricians, skin doctors are dermatologists and mad-doctors are psychiatrists (the hyphen prevents ambiguity).

Bertrand Russell says that he is free to use

plain English because everyone knows that he can express himself in language which only becomes intelligible after years of study. He suggests that each of us should write one work in terms which can be understood only by the erudite few. Here is an attempt at such an exercise:

His face was bacciform, sulcate, and scrobiculate. Concolorous, it was luteous, even porraceous. He was theroid and olid, leptochrous and plthiriastic. One deduced that his life had been apolaustic. His attitude was both ataraxic and nescient. He verbigerated. Of esculents he knew little and of pomology less. Holathurian and piddock was his diet and his drink was sorbet.

This description was strung together from a dictionary of difficult words. It can be roughly translated as a description of a deeply jaundiced, demented man suffering from malnutrition. It is a caricature of pudder.

#### EPONYMS

Eponyms often provide variations on the theme of prestige. The more names attached to a syndrome, the more important it becomes. Conditions are thought to present conceptual difficulties because their names are difficult to pronounce. Creutzfeld-Jakob disease, for instance, seems to acquire an intellectual gloss from its exotic label. Eponymous titles, however, usually refer to mere lists of signs and symptoms which are easy to understand.

Many of us find familiar eponyms useful, if only as an aid to memory. Most people would agree that the text book which tells us to drop "Argyll Robertson pupil" and substitute "reflex rigidity of the pupil" is being pedantic. Eponyms sometimes run wild and become absurd as in, "the Finsterer-Lake-Lahey modification of the Miculicz-Kronlein-Hofmeister-Reichal-Polya improvement of the Billroth II gastrectomy".

As an off-shoot, eponyms can be used as gambits in the game of one-upmanship. All of us have suffered from the medical lifeman who assumes that you too know all about the Rawicz-Landauer syndrome. He pins the implied compliment on you like a medal. Later you find the pin sticking out between your shoulder blades as he goes on subtly to demonstrate your ignorance.

#### PADDING

This is the tendency of words to multiply to fill the space available in the journals. In one sense all pudder is padding, but I am using it here to describe words which are unnecessary because they contribute nothing to meaning.

In a recent letter from a surgeon the last sentence read, "The diagnosis is probably peptic ulcer but neoplasm is a not unlikely possibility". There is no fine distinction between a possibility and a not unlikely possibility. The "not-un" syndrome is caricatured by Orwell in "a not unblack dog chased a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field".

There is a similar waste of a word in "the ankle jerks were completely absent". The word 'completely' does not drive the jerks further away. What is the purpose of 'definitely' in "This drug has definitely deleterious effects"? These effects are not worse than deleterious and are probably no worse than harmful. A. P. Herbert says he is waiting for the first verdict of "Definitely guilty, to be definitely hanged until he is very definitely dead".

Expressions like "in point of fact", "all things considered", "actually", and "of course", are usually padding. "Of course", is forgivable since it is usually used for the sake of politeness and implies that "I do not think you are such a fool as not to know this". The other expressions are acceptable when spoken but have no place in medical writing since they merely fill up space.

#### AMBIGUITY

Carelessness is the usual cause of ambiguity which then contributes to pudder. In the sentence "His disease can only be alleviated by an operation", the meaning is ambiguous. It may mean that the only useful treatment for this particular disease is an operation. Equally well, however, it could mean that the disease is incurable but the patient might be helped by an operation. A sentence in a neurological journal which reads, "motor and sensory nerve fibres are affected equally in arms and legs", may mean that the two types of fibres are equally affected, or that the affection of fibres in the arms is similar to that of fibres in the legs, or that both of these interpretations are true. The auxiliary verb "may" is a frequent source of ambiguity in

medical papers since sometimes it expresses merely possibility, sometimes it implies near-certainty, and sometimes it suggests a likelihood. On occasion an ambiguous construction is deliberately used as in, "Thank you for sending me your book. I shall lose no time in reading it". More often, ambiguity results from lack of criticism.

#### CONCLUSION

This review of pudder is incomplete and biased. We have not discussed syntax, idiom, grammar nor punctuation. Of these, syntax, the orderly arrangement of words, is probably the most important though Dr. Johnson thought it insignificant. English is the most flexible of languages and has avoided refined and rigid rules. Grammatical tenets give way if they conflict with common usage. Ungrammatical and badly constructed sentences can convey clear meanings though they may also cause irritation. The story is told of the almost illiterate carrier who had to draw up a detailed bill for a haulage job before he could be paid. After much labour he presented this, "Three comes and three goes at a pound a went is six pounds". This is crude, but his message is clear and unambiguous. Poor syntax, split infinitives, wrongful choice of prepositions and other grammatical errors are

but minor causes of pudder. This is not to suggest that such details be ignored.

Pudder is discourteous because it compels the reader to struggle for understanding. It reduces the speed and efficiency of the reading mechanism. When we read, our eyes scan merely the outlines of print. They move along a line in a series of rapid jerks with four or five brief pauses for a closer look at some words. From this sketchy survey a literate adult is able to infer the meaning. When the words which are read are unfamiliar the pauses become longer and the eyes sometimes move backwards to retrace ground already covered; they are said to regress. The number of regressions increases as the meaning becomes more obscure.

Finally, we can illustrate some aspects of word usage by paraphrasing an old joke. Let us describe a bow legged man. In pudder we could say, "the patient has a marked varus deformity of the lower extremities of rachitic actiology". Plain speaking, plus a little rhythm and rhyme might render this as, "over the hill and down the road, comes a man whose legs are bowed". Add drama and we have,

"Oh what manner of man is this  
With testes in parenthesis?"

**HOUSE  
PURCHASE**

**FINANCE  
INSURANCE**

**PRACTICE  
PURCHASE**

## **We Offer Dental Surgeons the Lowest Interest Rates in the British Isles**

**PRACTICE AND PARTNERSHIP LOANS — MAXIMUM ADVANCE.** Interest rate  $1\frac{1}{2}\%$  above Bank Rate. Minimum 6% **SIMPLE.** Repayments up to 15 years.

**HOUSE PURCHASE — MAXIMUM ADVANCE.** Repayment 25-30 years.

**EDUCATIONAL FEES PLAN — IMMEDIATE DRAWINGS.** Repayments over 15 years.  
Supported by all leading Banks.

**LIFE ASSURANCE** to provide Tax Free Income for your family — cover for a loan — partnership — estate duty etc.

**CONTINUOUS DISABILITY INSURANCE — 15% DISCOUNT TO THE PROFESSION.**

*IF YOU NEED FINANCE OR INSURANCE — YOU NEED*

### **J. W. SLEATH & CO. LTD.**

**INCORPORATED INSURANCE BROKERS**

**58 THEOBALD'S ROAD, W.C.1.**

Telephone: 01-242 4375 Private Exchange