

Addressing issues or writing what you mean

By Neville W Goodman

Introduction

Above all else, medical writing should be precise. In the vernacular, we should call a spade a spade. There is plenty we do not know, but we should say simply that we do not yet know, not that in the present state of knowledge some facts are not yet certain. I think medical writing is becoming less precise, at least that there is increasing use of imprecise phrases. The verb 'to address' is a typically imprecise word, especially when used in the phrase 'addressing the issue' [1]. I used this as an exploratory index of imprecise medical writing.

Methods

I searched MedLine 1950-2007 (Dialog Datastar) in May 2007, in eleven five-year periods starting with 1950 to 1954 and ending with the three-year period 2005 to 2007. I used the logical expression NEXT, which finds a second word following a first word within the next five words, to search for *address* or *addressing issues, questions or problems*. I searched separately in all fields and in title only. I compared the number of hits with the more precise phrases *ask* (or *asking*), *pose* or *answer question*, and *solve problem*. The numbers of hits were adjusted to correct for the increasing number of published papers, and scaled to allow direct comparisons of how usage changed with time.

Results

No issues or questions were addressed until the period 1975-9. Three problems were addressed in 1970-4, the first in an abstract in 1972 [2]. (There were six hits addressing problems between 1950 and 1969, but these were all presidential addresses.) By the period 1980-4, addressed issues were well established: addressed issues, questions or prob-

lems occurred in 601 papers, while asked, posed or answered questions, or solved problems occurred in 1684. In the last complete five-year period (2000-4) addressing (11375) was more popular than asking, posing, answering or solving (8840). Figure 1 shows the relative changes in usage, and also shows that all phrases have become relatively more common.

This increase in occurrence of all phrases is largely because of the increased inclusion of abstracts searchable on Medline: the searched phrases are more likely to occur in an abstract than in a title. In 1950-4, the 37 occurrences of solving problems were all in titles; in 2000-4, of the 3285 occurrences, 217 were in titles. Figure 2 shows that non-addressing is relatively much the same as it was in 1980-4.

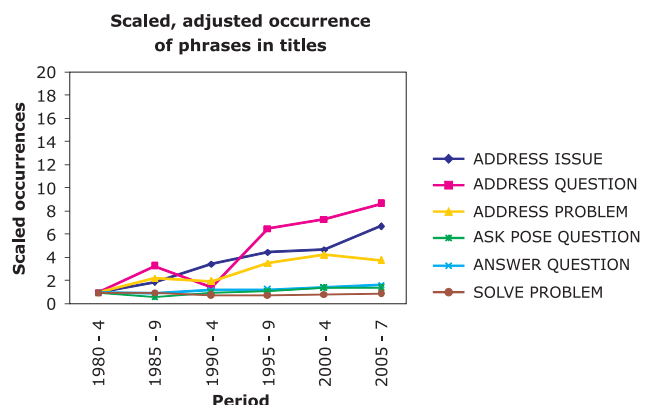


Figure 2: Occurrence of phrases in titles, adjusted for the total number of published papers in each period, and scaled to the index period 1980-4.

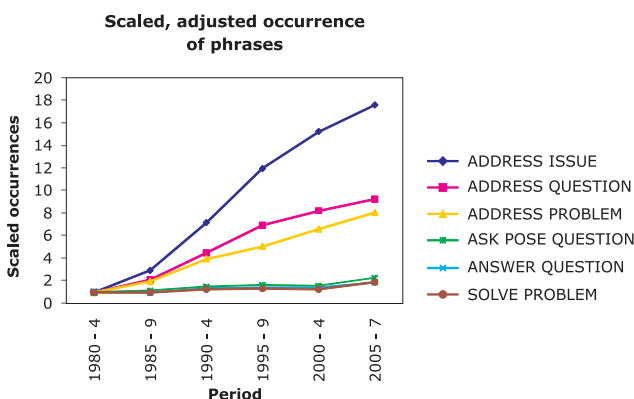


Figure 1: Occurrence of phrases in any field, adjusted for the total number of published papers in each period, and scaled to the index period 1980-4.

In 1950-4, authors were three times as likely to solve problems as ask, pose or answer questions. Problem solving has remained relatively constant over the years, unlike questions (see Fig 3).

Discussion

Medical writers did without addressing entirely for the first 25 years of MedLine, but 'addressing issues' is now the most popular general description of a study. Language changes over time, but it is a shame if it changes from the clear to the vague. Only two things can be addressed: envelopes and audiences. All questions are posed or asked; some are answered. Other addressing is waffle, risking the inference of an action that may not be intended [3]. Addressing issues raises waffle to a higher level [1]. Style guides warn that issue is not a synonym for problem [4], and suggest that the writer does not have a clear idea of his

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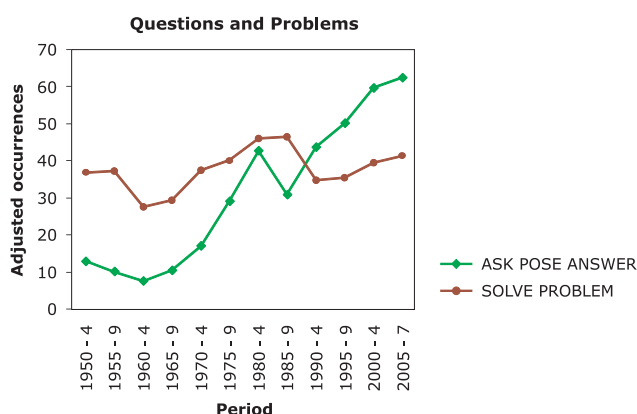


Figure 3: Occurrence in titles of asking posing or answering questions and of solving problems, adjusted for the total number of published papers in each period.

or her meaning [5]. At the least, the verb address postpones a proper description of what has been done, or is unnecessary repetition. There is a good example in one of the three papers from 1975 that are the first to address issues [6]. The authors write, “Two sets of questions are explored. The first set bears directly on the issue of gaining access to care. The second set addresses the issue of the acceptability of the services received.” The last two sentences are easily abbreviated, with no loss of meaning: *The first set is about gaining access to care, the second about the acceptability of the services received.*

Addressing issues is a vogue phrase. It is common in everyday speech, which is a likely reason for its increasing use in medical writing. It is not a good reason, and careful writers should strike it out.

Why asking, posing or answering questions has become so much more popular than solving problems I have no idea, nor any views on whether it is a good or a bad thing.

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3. Goodman NW, Edwards, MB. 3rd Ed. *Medical writing: a prescription for clarity*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006, p 105.
4. The Guardian Style Guide <http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide/> (accessed May 2008).
5. Lynch J. *Guide to Grammar and Style*, revised Jan 2008. <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/> (accessed May 2008).
6. Berkanovic E, Reeder LG, Marcus AC, Schwart -S. The effects of prepayment on access to medical care: the PACC experience. *Milbank Memorial Fund quarterly. Health and society* 1975;53:241-54.



De-gendered or de-sexed?

‘De-gendered toilets spark row’. On reading this headline I thought it was another example of the misuse of ‘gender’ when ‘de-sexed’ toilets would have been correct. The headline appeared in the BBC’s online news on 30 September this year [1]. It seems that in response to trans students who felt uncomfortable using the men’s toilets, Manchester University have changed the ‘ladies’ to ‘toilets’ and ‘gents’ to ‘toilets with urinals’. As toilets can’t have a sex (or gender), one can figure out that the heading is not directed at the toilets themselves but at the accommodation of the emotional sexual identity of transgender and transsexual people. So it seems that the BBC has got it right [2].

1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/7643175.stm
2. De Looze S. All Gendered up. *The Write Stuff* 2004;13(3):73-5.

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Could de-sexing toilets be something for women lawyers?

After Ken Russell, who is a professor emeritus of Metallurgy and Nuclear Engineering, had given evidence in court, a lawyer representing one of the parties asked him if he would be prepared to work with his client on more cases. The request was made in the men’s lavatories, which Russell found somewhat amusing. He later mentioned the proposition and the location in which it had been made to a woman lawyer who, displeased, retorted, “There are entirely too many deals going down in men’s rooms”. Russell acknowledges that she has a point but with the demise of men-only clubs for business discussions he thought women professionals might face a tricky problem getting rid of men-only lavatories—perhaps they should form an alliance with Manchester University (see box above).

Source: <http://improbable.com/>