

A Day for the Red Book

Publishing deadlines being what they are, it is sleety January as I write this, a freezing day of leaden skies and even more leaden spirits. Fortunately, I have a remedy for such gloom: It is called the Red Book. Allow me to explain.

It was once my good fortune to work with as high-spirited a gang of wits and wags as ever dedicated themselves to the proposition that work, if unavoidable, could at least be entertaining. This merry band handled publications and public relations for a university medical center and thus received newspapers and magazines from hospitals, medical schools, and other institutions whose staffs represented a broad range of literary skills (concentrated mostly, alas, at the lower end of the range). The contents of some of these were hilarious—too good to discard after the first shared guffaws. Thus was born the first Red Book, a folder of that color assigned to hold our fast-growing collection of journalistic howlers.

Though light of heart, we were actually hard of work in that office, and when the pressures had been building for a while and tempers had begun to fray, the tottering piles of work would be swept aside and out would come the Red Book. Our titters would turn to giggles and then to belly laughs as we huddled around the folder, revisiting our favorites, until at last, eyes streaming, we'd cling helplessly to the desk or each other to keep from falling on the floor.

For morale's sake, every editorial office should have a Red Book. I've kept one—though it's sometimes been blue or manila—

at every job I've held since then. Admittedly, the heights of hilarity I've described require the presence of like-minded (i.e., snottily satirical) colleagues. And the bloopers I've collected at the relatively sophisticated New England Journal lack the slapstick cluelessness that made that first Red Book such a joy. Still, it might be cheering to peek into a few random pages from the fat folder I've amassed at the Journal, its contents taken from manuscripts accepted for publication but not yet edited.

Book reviews are always a fertile field. "This book fills a much-needed void", praises one reviewer. Another notes that "a valuable and frequently ignored discussion of nerve injuries is provided". "The imminent retirement of Professor Herbert Spencer", writes a third, "leaves a space on many pathologists' library shelves." He adds, "One only wishes that a book of this size and expense had been divided into more manageable volumes, as was Spencer's predecessor." "The numerous errors in fact and in spelling are distracting", complained a persnickety reviewer, "and should have been avoidable with careful editing."

Original articles also contribute their share of entries, some reporting amazing results: "Of the 25 patients who died, 15 had discontinued inhaling for various reasons more than 60 days before death." "Over the second six weeks of therapy [the patient] was reduced to only one deeply palpable subcutaneous nodule." "Two patients had gastrinoma in the head of the pancreas, and one had gastrinoma in the tail." "One untreated

subject appears to have recrudesced after two years." "The one patient who died suddenly and was found to have had depleted batteries might have been saved if the device had been functional."

Our authors, pure in heart, often fail to notice their own double entendres. There was the one who asserted that "gynecologic surgeons do not and cannot function solely within the female genital tract". And this, from a discussion of testosterone patches: "To be used successfully, the scrotum must be of adequate size." An author with high standards defined impotence as the "inability to sustain morning, coital, or masturbation-related erections for more than one year".

Perhaps it's the fault of all that unintended suggestiveness, but some manuscript editors, it pains me to report, have dirty minds. Such a one on my own staff read the following innocent sentence—"Although female faculty members found research less rewarding than male members"—and delicately inserted the word "faculty" between the last 2 words.

(More from the Red Book, perhaps, the next time the Word Watcher is feeling glum.)

The Word Watcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. Now retired from the New England Journal of Medicine, she can be reached by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The Word Watcher, 1347 Sudbury Road, Concord MA 01742; or e-mail: loviglio@ma.ultranet.com.