

Titular Follies

What happens to otherwise intelligent scientists, I wonder, when they go off the reservation to write something “soft”—an editorial or book review, for example? Given a task they view as “literary”, many authors capable of perfectly sensible research reports suddenly go all over cutesy-pie.

Here’s how it must go: An authority on sleep apnea agrees to write an editorial about his specialty. He knows what he wants to say, but thinks he first needs a snappy title—preferably something literary. Searching his mental file of literary references to sleep, he gets an immediate hit: Hamlet! And so an otherwise thoughtful commentary arrives at the offices of the *New England Journal of Medicine* with the sappy title—you guessed it—“To Sleep, Perchance to Breathe—the Impact of Sleep Apnea”.

Hamlet is a popular source. An editorial on hepatitis C in another well-regarded (if too complaisant) journal bore the title: “To C or Not to C: These Are the Questions”. And speaking of hepatitis: The author of an editorial about the DNA sequences of the hepatitis G virus accused us of Comstockery when we made him put some clothes on his title, “The G-String Protein”.

Under the self-inflicted pressure to be liter-

ary, some authors lose their heads completely. One titled his editorial about a new resistant strain of *Staphylococcus aureus* “Tu Quoque, Fili?” (“You, too, my son?”), words reportedly spoken by Caesar to reproach Brutus as the latter raised his dagger to strike. And, you ask, the connection would be? Well, apparently the drug vancomycin, relied on to fight *S. aureus*, had failed, like Brutus, to live up to expectations, thus betraying us all—or something like that. (Caesar’s funeral showed up subtly in the penultimate sentence of another editorial, which read, before editing: “Praise for the two excellent articles in this week’s *Journal* should not entice us to bury the real objective.” Get it? Praise? Bury?)

An editorial whose author gave it the title “Antiretroviral Therapy: Waiting for Godot” is typical in two ways: (1) the literary work in question is evoked not only in the title but at both the very beginning and very end of the editorial, though at no point in between, and (2) the work in question, a tragicomic play about the meaninglessness of life, has nothing remotely to do with the subject of the editorial (the necessity of waiting for more definitive trial data).

Not all silly titles are literary. An editorial on a study showing that increasing your fluid intake can help prevent bladder cancer came

in with the title “Prevention at the Urinal”. Another, on sleep apnea (a subject that seems to attract dumb titles), was headed “Beware of the Snore on I-84”.

The authors of these absurdities tend to be inordinately proud of them and to suffer profoundly when they find that some editorial assassin has murdered their darlings. A medal for extraordinary tact under fire should be awarded to every editor who wins an author over to a more relevant, less fanciful title without once using the word “idiotic”.

The silly title that retired the trophy, in my opinion, appeared on an editorial about high-altitude pulmonary edema. Straining for literary cachet, the author remembered Blake’s famous line “Great things are done when men and mountains meet”. His title? “When Men on Mountains Leak”.

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.