

Call Me Ms: A Word Doctor's Titular Musings

A student in one of the medical-punctuation workshops I teach once asked me why I wrote my name wrong on the handouts. My initial response was a supremely professional “Huh?”

Then, in midjoke about being so stressed out trying to catch up on work in order to catch my flight that I had misspelled my own (admittedly polysyllabic Norwegian) surname, I realized that I hadn't.

The student proceeded to explain that he had always read and heard it was improper to use a courtesy title and an academic title together, that I therefore shouldn't list myself as “Ms Mary E Knatterud, PhD”, that I don't need the Ms.

But I *do* need the Ms! And the world needs to accept and affirm this most recent and still fledgling courtesy title, perhaps now more than ever, as the following three (sad but true) incidents attest:

(1) In late April, a defensive bride-to-be from the school of public health wrote a letter to our campus newspaper. She was bristling in response to an earlier editorial column that thoughtfully, respectfully implored engaged women to “think about if you really want to change your name—and what you really want to change it to—while you have the chance”. The incensed letter-writer huffed that women's “decision” to give up their names is not “shaped by some outside influence—their husbands, society, etc.” She followed that incredibly naïve misstatement with this alarmingly inappropriate analogy: “Just as most women who get abortions really want abortions, most women who change their names upon marriage really want to change them. I'm one of them.”

(2) In early May, a retirement-party-goer who had mailed in a check drawn on her own nonjoint bank account (which of course lists only her name and not her husband's or anyone else's) was appalled when she came in to pick up her preordered, prepaid copy of the retiree's memoir. The clerk could not confirm payment because the office's secretary had gone out of his or her way, for no conceivable reason, to figure out the husband's (different) last name and file payment information there, in a far-off section of the alphabet.

(3) In mid-May, a 22-year-old academic

health center senior sent her formal graduation announcement to “Mr and Mrs John Doe”, even though she knows full well that this particular wife kept her own first and last names; goes by Ms, never Mrs; and would be hurt to be utterly erased from the invitation. The normally independent-minded envelope-addresser's reason for her thoughtless, disrespectful lapse was “simplicity: the etiquette instructions from the printer said to do it that way”. (She did the same thing four years ago when she graduated from high school, despite being politely corrected at that time as well.)

My gut response—to (1) the deluded school of public health student who claimed that becoming Mrs Somebody Else is not influenced by society, (2) the office staff that managed to cash the woman's check under her own name yet felt the need to unearth her husband's for (mis)filing purposes, and (3) the college senior who insensitively kowtowed to antiquated etiquette instructions, even though she knew better—is a dropped jaw. It is indisputable that the patriarchal practice of a woman's discarding her last name (and often even her first name) in favor of her husband's was, and continues to be, “shaped by some outside influence—their husbands, society, etc.”! Entire scholarly treatises have been written tracing the historical, societal, and legal pressure on women to take their husbands' names.

Even in 2004, when Jane Roe and John Doe marry, the usual result is that they turn into John and Jane Doe and often into Mr and Mrs John Doe as well. I don't know of a single John Doe who would be honored, much less turn dewy-eyed, at the prospect of becoming Mr Jane Roe! (On the contrary, it is a caustic insult to dub a supposedly dominated husband as, for example, Mr Hillary Rodham or Mr Liza Minnelli.) If a bride insists on remaining Ms Jane Roe, the world at large will frequently challenge and thwart her choice, whether at a retirement party or on a graduation invitation.

All three of the above incidents took place just this past spring, on top of scores of other linguistically sexist snafus still festering in the past and no doubt lurking in the future. That is why I continue to conspicuously use Ms—even, in fact especially, in professional

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contexts where I also add PhD. The two titles bookend my name on my office-door sign, on my business cards, on my e-mail and snail-mail signature blocks. I don't want any colleague to ever label me Mrs or Miss, not even for quasisocial events like holiday parties or faculty banquets or staff members' showers. Feminists like me have worked too hard and too long trying to mainstream a courtesy title that doesn't trumpet our marital status to let it backslide into obscurity now, whether we keep our birth names after marriage or not. Given the resurgence of cultural conservatism on my campus and elsewhere, Ms needs to be foregrounded as a living symbol of freedom for those who see it that way. And I'm one of them.

Likewise, anyone who prefers Mrs or Miss should feel free to append it upfront to her name, no matter how many academic initials trail it. The courtesy of choosing one's own courtesy title also should extend to a man with a gender-neutral first name who might want to head off all three of the extant female courtesy titles by advertising himself as, say, "Mr Terry J Holden, RN".

Before I finished my doctorate in English a few years ago, I styled myself professionally as "Ms Mary E Knatterud, MA" and nobody ever made a peep about it. Perhaps now that I am a PhD, the Ms seems more extraneous.

But it isn't.

Speaking just for myself, I am usually not comfortable with being called Dr Knatterud, in writing or out loud, and my prominent use of Ms helps circumvent that. Granted, I truly am thrilled to be done with grad school and proud of all the intense work I did there. However, at the large public research university where I earned my terminal degree and where I still work, liberal arts professors do not go by Dr. In contrast, at the small private college where I earned my bachelor's degree, all my doctorate-holding professors did and do go by Dr—a practice that is perfectly fine for that setting, but not for my current one.

Besides, as a "word doctor" for surgeons (who undeniably are "real" doctors), I don't want to masquerade as someone who could be of any real use whatsoever if visitors in the hallway collide and suffer traumatic wounds or if a lunchmate needs an emergency tracheotomy or if a co-worker starts to miscarry.

Like it or not, the consensus that only MDs are "real" doctors is alive and well. Those same

scare quotes around "real" were also used in a recent *New Yorker* riff by Hendrik Hertzberg that bemoaned the confusion over courtesy titles for physician-politicians like Bill Frist and Howard Dean:

The most famous political doctor of them all, Henry Kissinger, is a special case. Dr. or Mr.? On the one hand, he's not a "real" doctor. On the other hand, his degree is in government, which passes the relevancy test. On the one hand, in what sounds a little like a twitch of Ivy League reverse snobbery, he once told the *Times*, which tries to accommodate people's wishes in such matters, that he preferred to be called Mr. Kissinger, so that's what the *Times* always calls him. (Well, nine times out of ten.) On the other hand, just about all the other papers that use honorifics call him Dr., and the secretaries in all his offices have always answered the phone, "Dr. Kissinger's office." On the one hand—oh, never mind. Let the International Criminal Court sort it out.

With his humorous flair, Hertzberg also put his finger on why Dr is such a coveted title—and why those of us who aren't MDs might feel a little sheepish expropriating it:

"Dr." means "good." It means taking care of people, curing their illnesses, relieving their pain, binding up their wounds, saving their lives. It means honored, learned, respected. Its humanitarian glamour sprinkles fairy dust even on Doctors of Business Administration.

OK, OK, I admit to being glad that my department chair, who himself holds both an MD and a PhD, graciously upholds me in letters, reports, and other formal contexts as Dr Mary Knatterud, which somehow makes me feel more valued and my job seem more secure. Nor am I so iconoclastic that I would want to be the only Ms in a rundown of my fellow PhD-bearing but non-MD faculty members: If our biostatistician and database manager and development director and lab administrator and history of medicine professors and ethicist and transplant registry analyst are all rendered as Dr or are all listed by their doctoral degrees only, then parallel treatment demands the

same for me, too. I also happily acquiesce to the house style of the publishing company in charge whenever I earn a byline in a journal article or book—which usually means no Ms, but it's a fair trade for another ms. in print!

Moreover, I absolutely agree with the prevailing commonsense mandate against preceding a name with Dr if it is immediately followed by academic initials that unambiguously indicate a doctor's degree of some stripe, regardless of the discipline, medical or otherwise. The sixth edition of *Scientific Style and Format* (1994) flatly states, "A term of address that represents an academic degree and appears before a personal name should not be used with an abbreviation representing the degree after the name." It offers these as examples (p 140):

Dr J B Wingler [or] J B Wingler MD [not "Dr J B Wingler MD"]
 Dr P R Cole [or] P R Cole PhD [not "Dr P R Cole PhD"]

Similarly, the *AMA Manual of Style* (9th ed, 1998) advises, "In most instances, the title Dr should be used only after the specific academic degree has been mentioned and only with the surname." It offers this illustration (p 285):

Arthur L. Rudnick, MD, PhD, gave the opening address. At the close of the meeting, Dr Rudnick was named director of the committee on sports injuries.

No fan of redundancy, I, too, would cringe at "Dr Bill Frist, MD" and "Dr Condoleezza Rice, PhD" and "Dr Bill Cosby, EdD". So, I would definitely excise one of the superfluous titles near each of those three names. For subsequent references on paper or screen, I would refer to the person by surname only (that is, as Frist, Rice, Cosby). If I chose to jettison the academic initials, I would hasten to divulge in another sentence exactly what kind of doctor we're referring to. As Arnold Melnick, DO, wryly put it, "we want to know, when we talk to a 'doctor,' what field of endeavor he or she represents. . . . Should I talk to him about my feet? my teeth? my diabetes? or my son's education? Or, we want to know what kind of doctor it is before we take our clothes off."

Melnick also pointed out that the

Associated Press, in its style book, recommends spelling out the type of doctorate, without using the degrees. It also says, "Use Dr. in first reference . . . of an individual who holds a doctor of medicine, doctor of osteopathy or doctor of podiatric medicine degree." (I would add to that list doctor of optometry and PhD in medical sciences.) For example: "According to Arnold Melnick, a local pediatrician," then later, "Dr. Melnick said"

I disagree with Melnick's advice to use Dr on later mentions rather than simply the surname alone. And I worry about his amending of the Associated Press's already-short list: Why not include a doctor of veterinary medicine? or a dentist? or a PhD in a field other than "medical sciences", or in a field other than the sciences—period? Hair-splitting is bound to omit and/or offend many would-be Drs. Of interest, the 2002 *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law, Fully Revised and Updated* (the successor to the edition I presume Melnick had access to) did add "doctor of dental surgery" to its initial examples, which now number four instead of three. It also elaborates, sensibly and even-handedly in my opinion, as follows (p 76):

If appropriate in the context, *Dr.* also may be used on first reference before the names of individuals who hold other types of doctoral degrees. However, because the public frequently identifies *Dr.* only with physicians, care should be taken to assure that the individual's specialty is stated in first or second reference. The only exception would be a story in which the context left no doubt that the person was a dentist, psychologist, chemist, historian, etc.

In some instances it also is necessary to specify that an individual identified as *Dr.* is a physician. One frequent case is a story reporting on joint research by physicians, biologists, etc.

Do not use *Dr.* before the names of individuals who hold only honorary doctorates.

Do not continue the use of *Dr.* in subsequent references.

Note that I am focusing on current US usage only. Ironically, male surgeons in the UK have, by long tradition, been addressed as Mr rather than Dr; nor do female surgeons there use Dr (even though most nonsurgeon physicians and nonphysician doctorate-holders do!). According to a spokesperson at the British Medical Association (Fletcher G, personal communication, 1 July 2004),

this is still the case. In the UK, the convention is that those “doctors” with FRCS (ie Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons) call themselves Mr/Miss/Mrs/Ms rather than Dr.

Ms is common usage in the UK.

Nonsurgeons are Dr irrespective of whether they have PhDs although some academic doctors may use Prof if they are professors.

Holders of PhD are also called Dr.

We don't have M.D.s. In the UK, the standard medical degrees are bachelor of medicine & bachelor of surgery, abbreviated to MB ChB, MBBS, etc. Holders of these qualifications are referred to as “Doctors”.

Doubling up in this manner [à la “Ms. Elizabeth Smith, M.D.”] is not convention. Surgeons tend to put FRCS after their name to indicate they are medically qualified.

A spokesperson from the British etiquette authority *Debrett's People of Today* (quoting *Debrett's Correct Form*, per the 2002 Hodder Headline edition) indicated that Ms may be perceived as less polite and that OB/Gyn physicians are called Dr in Scotland and Northern Ireland but not in England and Wales:

It is still true that surgeons in the UK do not go by Dr. Therefore male surgeons are known as Mr Smith, and female surgeons as Miss/Mrs/Ms Smith.

Ms is used in the UK if a woman has chosen to be addressed in this way, or if

whoever is addressing her does not know if she is married or single (though it would always be more polite to find this out and attempt to use Miss or Mrs). It tends to be used quite frequently, as in the US.

. . . Another piece of information you may find useful is that an Obstetrician or Gynaecologist is addressed as a surgeon in England and Wales (Mr/Mrs) while in Scotland and Northern Ireland it is customary for him or her to be called Dr. (Mathieson E, personal communication, 2 July 2004)

In Germany, courtesy titles and academic titles routinely pile up, redundancy be hanged. As Anatoly Liberman, a University of Minnesota professor of German, Scandinavian, and Dutch, elucidated,

when addressing letters, you are expected to write: Herrn {accusative} Professor Dr. Wolfgang Schmidt. In conversation, Herr Professor Schmidt would suffice. The same is true of addressing women, except that Fraulein is no longer used: all women are addressed as FRAU (Frau Professor Schmidt, and so forth). On the door of a university office, one often sees Professor Dr. Dr. Wolfgang Schmidt, which means that this learned gentleman has an additional degree from some other institution or obtained it in a second area. (Liberman A, personal communication, 6 April 2004)

I understand full well that my favorite contemporary US style manuals are dead-set against my own dual-title stance (not counting our obvious common ground of banning double-doctoring). *The Chicago Manual of Style* (15th ed, 2003) even invokes the word “always” (p 563): “When an academic degree or professional designation follows a name, such titles [social titles, such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., and Dr.] are always omitted.” *The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage* (1994) is equally matter-of-fact (p 333): “Academic, military, or civil honors follow a name and are preceded with a comma. Other titles such as Mr., Mrs., and Dr. are dropped.” The verb “dropped” becomes a direct command in the *University of Minnesota*

Style Manual (online ed, www1.umn.edu/wrelate/style/, last modified on 2 March 2004; accessed on 25 May 2004): “Always abbreviate the social titles *Mr.*, *Ms.*, *Mrs.*, and *Dr.* with a name. Drop them if you use another title”, as in “*Ms. Sarah Stoner*”, “*Ms. Stoner*”, and “*Sarah Stoner, Ph.D.*” But what self-respecting, intellectually alive writer slavishly follows every edict of every expert? If in a particular context or worldview there is a valid reason for disregarding or tweaking a certain rule, then by all means, it is our right to do so. Just as I merrily persist in writing “pre- and postoperative”—in defiance of the *AMA Manual of Style’s* promotion of “preoperative and postoperative” (p 209), a base repetition that, at least in my subfield of surgery, is scoffed at as wordy and unidiomatic—I remain compelled to flout the prejudice against pairing *Ms* (and *Miss*, *Mrs*, or *Mr*, according to one’s own preference) with academic initials. Within the bounds of conciseness and consistency, the “courtesy” in the term “courtesy title” suggests that even terminally degreed people can preface their name however they wish.

References and Notes

1. Stewart RRS. What’s in a name? couples, think on it. (Editorial column.) *Minnesota Daily* (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), 28 Apr 2004.
2. Dalager B. Women can decide. (Letter to the editor.) *Minnesota Daily* (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), 29 April 2004.
3. One excellent overview is in Miller C and Swift K, *Words and women: new language in new times* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books; 1977).
4. The title *Ms* has a fascinating, but rocky, history. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed, 2000; p 1151), *Ms.* or *Ms* “was first suggested as a convenience to writers of business letters by such publications as the *Bulletin of the American Business Writing Association* (1951) and *The Simplified Letter*, issued by the *National Office Management Association* (1952)”.

Miller and Swift (see endnote 3) chronicle the evolution of *Ms* in compelling and sometimes infuriating detail, citing the following tidbits (pp 88-91) among many others (note the mention below of *Ms* used contemptuously for a female physician and, again, of *Dr Kissinger*):

The abbreviation *Ms.* has been around as a title of courtesy since at least the 1940s, but it was largely unused until two things happened: the growth of direct mail selling made the abbreviation an effective time and money saver, and a significant number of women began

to object to being labeled according to their (presumed) marital status.

The 1972 *American Heritage School Dictionary* was the first dictionary to include *Ms.* . . . By 1976 dictionaries published by Merriam-Webster, Random House, Doubleday, Funk & Wagnalls, and Collins-World also included *Ms.* as an accepted social form analogous to *Mr.*

. . . Some speakers and writers use *Ms.* only as a put-down, either coyly or with contempt for the concept it represents. George Gilder, in a book criticizing the women’s movement, appears to apply the title only to feminists with whom he disagrees most sharply, among them Mary Jane Sherfey, M.D., who comes out *Ms.* rather than *Dr. Sherfey.* . . .

In 1973 the Government Printing Office sanctioned *Ms.* as an “optional prefix” for use in all federal government publications. Swimming against the stream, the governor of New Hampshire sent out a memo in 1974 to all secretaries employed by that state ordering that “The practice of using *Ms.* instead of *Miss* or *Mrs.* is to be discontinued immediately.” The ruling was made, according to news reports, because the governor did not “believe” in the usage; what New Hampshire women felt about the matter he seems not to have considered germane.

The *New York Times*, which covered the New Hampshire governor’s edict without comment, was continuing to use either *Mrs.* or *Miss* for all women. [Its use of courtesy titles] raised the question of basic courtesy. Having reported that Billie Jean King prefers to be known as *Ms. King*, the *Times* continued to call her *Mrs. King*. In contrast, the paper has frequently referred to Henry Kissinger, who holds a Ph.D., as *Dr. Kissinger*, an unusual procedure unless the person referred to has indicated such a preference. And it consistently uses the African names which a number of prominent black men have adopted. . . .

5. Just for the record, my wonderful longtime husband also kept his “maiden” name after marriage. He used to receive cards, typically from his aunts, addressed to Master So-and-So when he was a little boy but has preferred the title *Mr* since upper elementary school.

6. Hertzberg H. What’s up, Doc? *New Yorker* 27 January 2003:27-8.

7. Melnick A. Say, what kind of *Dr.* are you, anyway? *AMWA* [American Medical Writers Association] *Journal* 2002;17(3):30-1.