Verbum sapienti

Obfuscation¹ and amphibology² may be the dominant adversaries in his never-ending quest for scientific excellence, but the innovation of this page by our European Editor reveals his devotion to concinnity.³ As a consequence, many contributors have undoubtedly suffered pangs of remorse as well-beloved phrases have vanished under his editorial edict. Their reluctant admission of the resultant improved clarity might indeed mollify the reaction to his gentle chiding on the use of "extravagant English". However, a more severe reprimand of "sesquipedalianism" would certainly have sent many scattering in search of a meaning other than the apparent accusation of association with an aging bicycle team! The discovery of "the style characterised by the use of long words" does not readily identify its interesting derivation, the distractor being the modification of the prefix, "*semis-que*, a half in addition", leading to "an object that is a foot and a half in length". The application to grammatical use appears generally to be credited to that erudite Scot, James Boswell, who undoubtedly was instrumental in ensuring that his Sassenach mentor, Samuel Johnson, restrained his verbosity and thus achieved immortality with such classics as "A Journey to the Hebrides", one of those masterpieces universally revered but seldom read.

The use of such archaic words may be anathema to scientific editors, but there is little they can do to stem the popularity of polysyllabilism, which reflects the surging knowledge of aspects such as complex enzyme systems and multifaceted bizarre immunological phenomena. The enforced solution, the adoption of acronyms, poses equally dire threats of confusion. The context becomes critical. Specialist bias becomes paramount, determining, for example, whether the control of haematological maturation by colony stimulation factors (CSF) should be considered of greater consequence than the normal immersion of our cerebral hemispheres. To most of us, PET denotes positron emission tomography, yet to many of our psychiatric colleagues, it means 'parental education training'. Nevertheless, the new technetium cerebral perfusion agent, hexamethylpropyleneamine oxine, is somewhat more recognisable as HM-PAO, or even its proprietary name, 'Ceretec'. The laudable ingenuity feasible in the creation of acronyms is certainly exemplified by MAG-3, the radiopharmaceutical recently introduced for renal function quantitation, mercaptoacetyl triglycerine; "that flat MAT of RAS" lacks something!

I.P.C. Murray

Verbum sapienti – "a word to the wise" – is intended to be an occasional contribution on the use of words and language, especially in relationship to medicine and medical writers. Contributions from readers will be welcome.

¹ Causing bewilderment or confusion

² Ambiguity arising from a grammatical construction that can be understood in more than one way

³ Elegance of literary style