

EDITORIAL

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Case Reports

How important is it to report single cases of rare or bizarre disease entities? We regularly receive such manuscripts, and one of the vexing decisions that have to be taken is whether the material warrants the space it will occupy in the *Journal*, considering the increasing cost of printing and the ever-present backlog of articles awaiting publication.

What can such reports achieve? Completely new syndromes must obviously be brought to the attention of doctors so that they may be alerted to the possibility of such cases turning up in their own practices. When writing such an article one must be very careful not to claim a 'first' unless there is really not the slightest doubt about the unique status of the case study. Such certainty is not easy to ensure and it is usually better to avoid absolute statements concerning a unique occurrence. There must also be a reasonable expectation that the same syndrome may occur again, otherwise the publication of what must forever remain a single case will not serve any useful purpose, except to provide a few moments' interesting reading.

In this respect reports of curious accidents, or pathology as a result of circumstances that are unlikely to occur again, can only serve a useful purpose in a journal provided certain aspects of therapeutic handling are thereby emphasised. The purely bizarre cases with no further diagnostic or therapeutic message, have only news value, and it is not the function of a scientific journal to disseminate such news items. If the report of, for instance, the ingestion of some completely unusual substance, liquid or otherwise, highlights the need for careful blood gas analyses and the pitfalls to be avoided in such

biochemical assessments, the article has a practical message and it should be published. The injury to the throat of an archaeologist as a result of swallowing a fossilised bone that had found its way into his camp stew, although a rare occurrence, cannot be regarded as of scientific interest.

A common mistake of authors who write about single, rare cases, is to give too much irrelevant detail, and to devote too much space to the discussion of historical background and previous reports. A single case is not a good peg on which to hang a review article of a group of related conditions. Either a larger number of cases must be collected, or the case report in the review article must be no more than a paragraph, included merely to illustrate a particular point the author wishes to make.

It is also important to bear in mind that what is highly unusual in one locality may be commonplace somewhere else, and therefore the circulation of the particular journal must be considered. A report of a case of cholera will certainly elicit interest in the *South African Medical Journal*, but will go almost unnoticed in a country where the disease is endemic. Similarly, our readers in Cape Town may find a detailed account of a local case of malaria fascinating, but a reader in Natal will wonder why on earth so much space is allowed for it in the *Journal*.

Short case reports are often best presented as letters to the editor, and, as has repeatedly been pointed out, such letters do receive listings in *Current Contents* as well as *Index Medicus*, and are incorporated in the index of the *Journal* itself, so that they are not lost to posterity.

Dokters en Brandstof

Dokters ry baie. Dit is uit die aard van hul werk onvermybaar dat hulle gedurig 'n motor beskikbaar moet hê, en veral die huisarts op die platteland moet iedere maand sommer groot afstande aflê. Die feit dat die meeste geneeshere se huisgesinne twee motors aanhou, is eerder 'n dure noodsaaklikheid as 'n uiting van wellewendheid. Die vrou wat 'n ryding benodig, hetsy om die kinders by die skool te gaan haal, of om kruideniersware te gaan koop, moet haar eie motor besit, want sy kan nie haar man s'n benut nie. Juis daardie paar minute wanneer sy weg is om gou iets by die winkel te gaan haal, sal die oomblik wees wat 'n pasiënt kies om 'n koronêre trombose te ontwikkel of 'n multipara om een-twee-drie 'n baba in die wêreld te bring. Ewe min kan die besige praktisyn dit bekostig om tyd af te staan vir die onvermybare ryery waaraan enige familie met 'n motor onderhewig is.

Dit skyn dus asof die gemiddelde dokter nie veel tot brandstofbesparing kan bydra nie. 'n Mens wil graag bespaar, maar weet ons hoe? Ons het reeds vantevore gevra dat ons lesers nie misbruik maak van die spesiale voorregte wat aan geneeshere toegestaan is wat brandstofverkryging en spoedbeperking betref nie, en in dié opsig kan die owerhede werklik nie enige beskuldigende vinger na ons wys nie. Maar as goeie burgers van die land bly dit steeds ons plig om mee te help om soveel brandstof as moontlik te bespaar en in dié verband is daar tog 'n paar dinge wat in gedagte gehou kan word.

Dit is jammer om op ons paaie te merk dat die nutjie van die 80 km/uur spoedbeperking nou reeds afgeslyt is en dat al hoe meer mense bewus, of meer waarskynlik onbewus, die nuwe spoedgrense begin oorskrei. Ons padongeluksyfer styg

al weer, en een van die dae sal die verkeerskonstabels weer hulle tande moet begin wys om te verseker dat ons aanvanklike petrolbesparing volgehou word. Ons kan gerus saamstaan en sorg dat die mediese beroep ten minste nie gemaan hoef te word nie. Dokters ry min onnodige ritte—hulle probeer dit eerder uit eie belang vermy, maar nogtans sal 'n bietjie nadenke talle geleenthede laat opduik wat tot besparing kan lei. Die laaste telefoonoproep huis toe om te hoor of daar nog werk wag, kan gebruik word as geleentheid om te verneem wat by die kafee gekoop kan word op pad huis toe sodat iemand anders nie hoef te ry nie.

Daar is tot dusver nog min klem gelê op die brandstofverbruik van enige motor onder spesiale omstandighede. Ons praat wel almal oor spoed, maar vergeet dat 'n vinnige wegtrekslag by 'n verkeerslig waarskynlik meer brandstof verbruik as wat op 'n 10-km rit teen 80 km/uur bespaar word. En ons trek tog so graag vinnig weg—soms uit skone windmakerigheid en soms omdat ons geïrriteerd voel en dit help om van frustrasies ontslae te raak. Vonkproppe is gelukkig nie skaars nie, en 'n nuwe stel sal somer 'n groot petrolbesparing teweegbring as die ou proppe al bietjie halfslyt is. Motorverenigings kan nog talle ander wenke gee, en as ons erkentlik wil wees insake die toegewings wat ons van die owerhede ontvang het, moet elkeen van ons sorg dra dat ons van hierdie wenke gebruik maak en ons deel bydra om ten minste soveel as wat ons kan te bespaar, al is dit nie uit die aard van ons werk altyd moontlik om ritte soveel te beperk as wat die gemiddelde lid van die publiek dit kan doen nie.
