

Metaphorically speaking

Quotes from MJA contributors in 2005

It is unusual to find mention of beavers' living arrangements in a physiology journal but, according to Swain, there are similarities between beaver pond levels and blood glucose levels. A beaver must maintain a constant water level in its pond for the proper functioning of its lodge, just as we must maintain our blood glucose levels within a defined range to ensure, among other things, brain function.¹ The beaver controls the water bed by changing outflow over the dam and inflow from the stream beds, just as insulin controls glucose leaving the blood and entering tissues, and, among other things, glucagon affects glucose release from the liver.

Analogy and metaphor may be figurative rather than scientific forms of communication but they can nevertheless help us, our students and our patients, to integrate new information by drawing on similarities with prior knowledge. Swain's engaging beaver pond analogy of blood glucose control is a quiet and gentle one. As you will see in the following selections, this year's MJA contributors have used a variety of analogies and metaphors (sometimes unwittingly) to try to get their point across. As well as creating a bridge to understanding, these devices inject unexpected and welcome humour into the generally dignified world of medical publishing.

You asked for it . . .

"Attached is my assessment of the manuscript. It's a bit like panning for gold — you have to go through a lot of sand to find the gold."

"This is a weak study, well executed. Unfortunately, a great coat of paint does not make up for a deficient underlying structure."

"This is a naïve exercise in stamp collecting without any attempt to ascertain the origin and value of the stamps."

The medicalisation of peer review

"The whole paragraph is a case of malignant pharmacological speculation syndrome."

Picture this . . .

"The commercialisation of medical patents is but a small tile in the mosaic of Australian innovation . . ."

"Epidemiological data provide a window through which theories of causality may be viewed."

"Seeding grants don't sprout, pilots don't fly."

Accidentally

" . . . patients [are] falling through the cracks in the Northern Territory."

"We give . . . the incidence of this complication according to medical literature."

"This is a simply awful paper."

Understood

Not infrequently, the MJA receives manuscripts that challenge the existing scientific dogma or confront our social sensibilities. In such circumstances, it is not unusual for the editors to make certain of the rigour of a manuscript with an additional cycle of peer review. As expressed by one expert reviewer . . .

"I will state the obvious. You've got a hot potato on your hands. The idea of piercing its skin several times with the fork of extended peer-review will ensure that the thing is less likely to explode when placed in the microwave of public scrutiny."

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¹ Swain DP. The beaver pond analogy of blood glucose control. *Am J Physiol* 1999; 276(6 Pt 2): S69-S73. □