

THE JOURNAL OF NUCLEAR MEDICINE (ISSN 0161-5505) is published monthly by the Society of Nuclear Medicine Inc., 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316. Periodicals Postage Paid at Herndon, VA and additional mailing offices. *Postmaster*, send address changes to *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316.

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Poetry and Scientific Writing

It would seem, on initial consideration, that poetry and scientific writing are quite distinct and different from each other.

In scientific writing, we strive to present information as objectively as possible without frills, boasts or unprovable claims, or even subjective adjectives. Adjectives in general are frowned upon. The senior author or editor excises "slight," or "small" or "mild to moderate." "How much?" we ask. State the quantity; preferably the mean of several measurements! Indicate the size of the group and the number of observations! Calculate the standard deviation! If other statistical tests are used, reference them! Discuss the findings as briefly as possible in light of other pertinent work on the subject. Succinctly state the conclusions based upon the evidence reported.

Poetry uses the same alphabet, the same palette, so to speak, but the words composed of these letters and the sentences constructed with them have distinctly different goals. The aim is to describe feelings, moods, experiences which cannot be described in any other way. "What does the poem mean?" some ask. The poet responds "If I could say it another way, I would not have had to write a poem."

Interestingly enough, we need and use both styles of writing. We need the scientific portion of our mind to accumulate facts with precision and accuracy. As we build our intellectual structure, we want each layer to be sound, without gaps in the support for the next layer. Inevitably gaps sometimes occur anyway. An artifact is interpreted as an observation, and a faulty conclusion evolves. Sometimes others follow. This can happen in both scientific research and clinical medicine. Physicians and scientists work hard to recognize and avoid these pernicious gaps.

Yet, in poetry, we delight in the soaring of our imaginations: the ideas and emotions that take flight from the written words and have so much meaning beyond the simple dictionary definition of the work used. The poet knows that words are powerful and that they will evoke in each reader or listener a unique, and nevertheless often universal, response. Each of us has our own set of experiences and memories which we bring to the poem.

There is a lesson in the art of the poet for the authors of scientific manuscripts. It is precisely because we all do what the poet knows we will do that the author of the scientific article must try to be as unambiguous and as precise as possible. At the same time, the more creative reader, scientist and *physician will intuitively know the value* (can I use such a phrase?) of the observation being reported and know the next experiment to do or the best procedure to order. Our best science lecturers know how to inspire us, stimulate our thinking, fertilize our ideas and ignite our imaginations so that we come away from the lecture with more than just knowledge of the results communicated. We know what they mean in the overall structure even though that structure is still incompletely defined.

We all benefit when those who think and write clearly about science can think and communicate like poets as well as scientists.

Stanley J. Goldsmith, MD
Editor-in-Chief, The Journal of Nuclear Medicine
June 1997