

The Case of Six Honest Serving Men and “Hypercuriosis”

To the Editor: *Kipling's Guide to Writing a Scientific Paper* published in your Journal (1) is a valuable text, which I often recommend to my students or novice writers as a guidance for building the IMRaD structure of a scientific paper. As I belong to the sphere of medical humanities, I was delighted to see how instructive and valuable a piece of poetry, such as Kipling's poem *The Elephant's Child*, could be used for explaining the rigid structure of a research paper.

While exploring the history of *Liječnički vjesnik* several days ago, I found, by pure chance (or serendipity), an interesting article entitled “The Written Word in the Scientific Work of Physician” by Tihomil Beritić (2), published in 1974. In this article, the author explained how continuous development of medicine made physicians become scientists and follow the rules of scientific writing (2). The author of this article, Tihomil Beritić (1919-1999), was a Croatian clinical toxicologist and editor-in-chief of two Croatian journals, *Liječnički vjesnik* (1958-1975) and *Archives of Industrial Hygiene and Toxicology* (1968-1976). He was most probably aware of different, and sometimes poor, quality of articles submitted to those journals and aimed to describe the principles of medical writing, giving detailed instructions how to achieve an adequate composition, documentation, and style. Reading that paper, I was amazed to see that Beritić, as well as David Sharp in his article published in the *Croatian Medical Journal*, used Kipling's poem *The Elephant's Child* as an explanatory model for what we now call the IMRaD format. Furthermore, Beritić noted that such a model was not his but Richard Asher's idea. I was immediately prompted to find Asher's article that Beritić quoted. It was entitled “Six Honest Serving Men for Medical Writers” and appeared in *JAMA*, April 7, 1969 (3). Stating that Kipling's poem *The Six Honest Serving Men* gives an admirable summary of the way we acquire most of our knowledge, Asher, as well as Beritić and Sharp, used the poem to explain how to write a simple, accurate, orderly, and complete article and to suggest key guidelines to a clear writing style. It was an admirably written paper, with a lot of good pieces of advice and refined sense of humor. Explaining, for example, how routine medical jargon is “unpleasant stuff to swallow”, Asher first provided Kipling's original poem:

I keep six honest serving men
 (They taught me all I know):
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.

Then he demonstrated how to apply it when writing a paper for a medical journal:

Summary

(A Case of Elephantis Hypercuriosis Infantis)

A survey of the writer's personal methodology in general inquiry has been carried out, and the results analyzed to determine components of the interrogatory technique. Six distinct forms of question were isolated, as tabulated below. It is claimed that responses evoked by these were responsible for the total quantity of knowledge acquired by the author. (3)

For all three authors, Kipling's poem was obviously the most didactic piece of text for writing a scientific paper. When Asher's and Beritić's articles appeared in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the style in use was mostly narrative and essayistic. Sharp's paper, on the other hand, describes current recipes for shaping and structuring the text. Nevertheless, each article clearly reflects the individual style of its author, which makes it unique and interesting. Despite conveying the same message and using the same model, all three writers succeeded in offering interesting, instructive, and unforgettable reading. Hence, *The Six Honest Serving Men* continue to link successfully different people living in different times and in different countries.

I must add that there is a detail upon which I disagree with David Sharp. He mentioned that Kipling was no longer fashionable as a writer of either poetry or prose, although the germs of wisdom his writings convey to the readership are still actual (1). I would rather suggest that the simplicity and clarity give Kipling's work the power, applicability, and ever lasting value in the eyes of those who like literature, as well as those who intend to write scientific papers. It brought us together in our thoughts, publications, and knowledge and in return, we enliven Kipling's poems and bring them to fashion again.

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- 1 Sharp D. Kipling's guide to writing a scientific paper. *Croat Med J* 2002;43:262-7.
- 2 Beritić T. Written word in scientific work of physicians [in Croatian]. *Liječ Vjesn* 1974;96:733-8.
- 3 Asher R. Six honest serving men for medical writers. *JAMA* 1969;208:83-7.