“Celebrating Plain Language at NIH”

Remarks by Susan Dentzer

The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

March 20, 2002

“Prevention of Chemotherapy-Induced Alopecia in Rats by CDK Inhibitors”

Article in *Science, J*anuary 5, 2001
by Stephen T. Davis and 24 others

Abstract of Article

- “Most traditional cytotoxic anticancer agents ablate the rapidly dividing epithelium of the hair follicle and induce alopecia (hair loss). Inhibition of cyclin-dependent kinase 2 (CDK2), a positive regulator of eukaryotic cell cycle progression, may represent a therapeutic strategy for prevention of chemotherapy-induced alopecia (CIA) by arresting the cell cycle and reducing the sensitivity of the epithelium to many cell cycle-active anti-tumor agents. Potent small-molecule inhibitors of CDK2 were developed using structure-based methods. Topical application of these compounds in a neonatal rat model of CIA reduced hair loss at the site of application in 33 to 50 percent of the animals. Thus, inhibition of CDK2 represents a potentially useful approach for the prevention of CIA in cancer patients. “

Words from abstract we used in our Jan. ’01 piece

- Hair follicle
- Hair loss
- Cell
- Prevention
- Chemotherapy
- Compounds
- 33 to 50 percent
- Rat
- Animals
- Cancer patients

“Word Utility Ratio:”

- 148 words in abstract
- 15 words used in piece (not including commonly used articles and prepositions)
- Total WUR of 10 percent

“Clyde the Wordhawk, Laying Up the Fancy Adjectives”

Article in The New York Times, Wednesday, March 13, 2002

By reporter Chris Hedges

The Gospel According to Clyde (aka Walt Frazier)

- “When you use words people are cognizant of what you say, but when you use cliches no one says anything.”
- “People will tell me I used ‘ubiquitous’ two times while other guys use cliches the whole game.”
- “I set Marv [Alpert] off when I use cacaphony.”

“Word Jam: An Electrifying, Mesmerizing, Gravity-Defying Guide to a Powerful and Awesome Vocabulary”

“U.S. OK’s Calling Fetus a Child” – headline in *The Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 2002

Dueling Headlines

- “Greenspan Sees Recovery; Hints at Rising Interest Rates” – New York Times
- “Greenspan Says Economy Still Sluggish; Voices Caution on Rate Hikes” – Washington Post

Alternative Abstract?

- “Most traditional cytotoxic anticancer agents ablate the rapidly dividing epithelium of the hair follicle and induce alopecia, or hair loss.”
- OR...”Most traditional chemotherapy drugs that fight cancer by killing cells interfere with the normal mechanisms of cell division in hair follicles. This can result in hair loss.”

A Proposition:
Plain Language Doesn’t Mean that You Can’t Use Big Words When You Need Them!

Another proposition: Language that is too plain can mislead or backfire

The Lancet, January 2000

- Article by Olsen and Goetzsche
- “Screening for breast cancer with mammography is **unjustified.”**

In “unplain” but less inflammatory language, what they probably meant:

- “On the basis of our review of the six clinical trials on screening mammography –four of which we concluded were badly flawed and whose results we dismissed – we conclude that there is at present no solid scientific basis for a widespread program of screening mammography based on the supposition that screening reduces mortality from breast cancer.”

Proposed Color-Coded Plain Language Alert System (PLAS)

BLUE ALERT

- **Hifalutin’ language ahead**
- **Soaring over everybody’s heads, like the sky**

BLACK ALERT

- **Stultifying prose; may be an IRS memo.**
- **Can’t see your way through to the end of the tunnel**

BROWN ALERT

- **Obfuscatory**
- **Lots of you-know-what to wade through**

PURPLE ALERT

- **Too many ruffles and flourishes, as in purple prose**

ALL-CLEAR LANGUAGE ALERT

Clear…as a bell.

Utterly transparent, like a cool mountain stream.

Really, really beautiful!