

# p kestaff

PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION

Pikestaff 70  
November 2014

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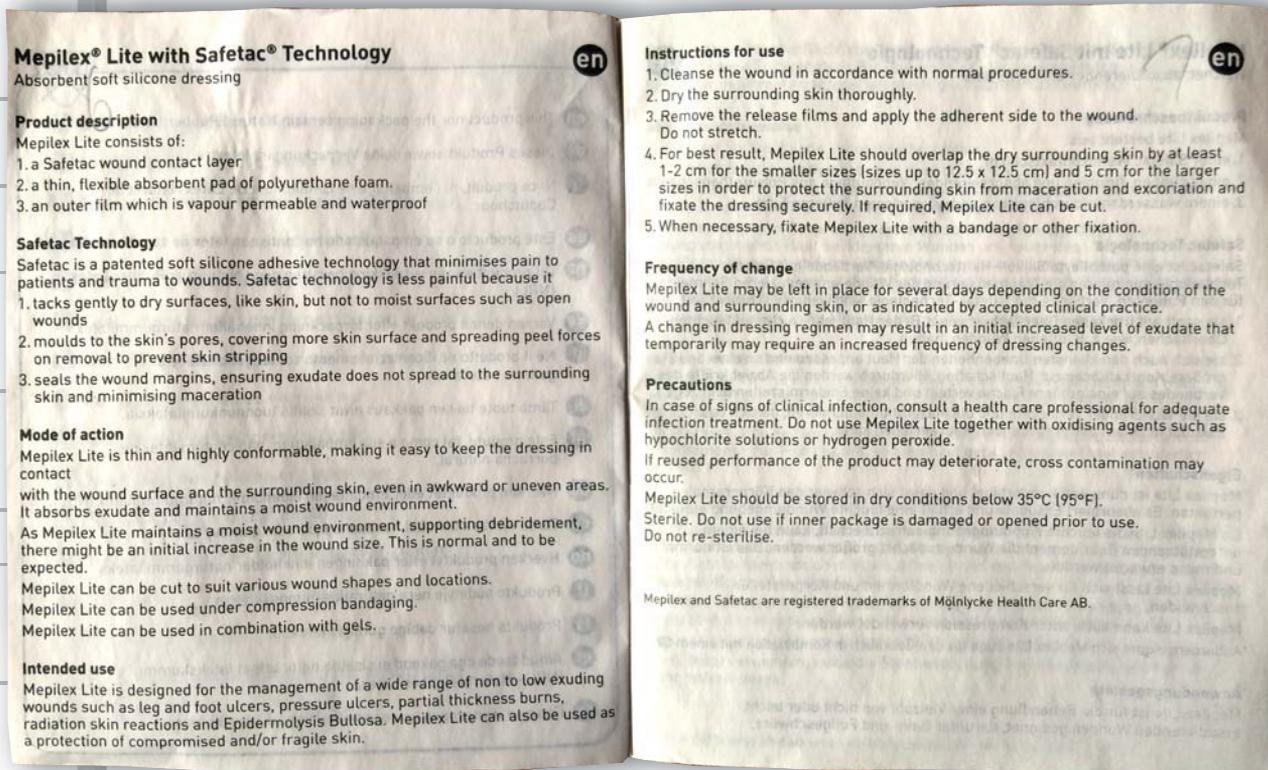
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## Dressing leaflet plastered with baffling English

Should a consumer information leaflet for medical dressings be written in incomprehensible English and in such tiny print as to be barely legible? That was the question a Pikestaff reader asked when faced with the booklet for Mepilex Lite, a silicone dressing for damaged skin. He sent it to us for analysis.

The booklet is printed in type that's about 5.5 point, making it hard to read even by people with good sight. (Pictured here, actual size.) And the text is full of



unexplained medical terms such as minimizing maceration, peel forces, moist wound environment, compromised skin, exudate, skin stripping, adherent side, excoriation, fixate Mepilex with a bandage or other fixation, and dressing regimen. 'Peel forces' is an interesting example of compression as it probably means the forces applied when the dressing is peeled off.

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Two of the worst examples of unusual language come in these sentences:

- 'Mepilex Lite is thin and highly *conformable*, making it easy to keep the dressing in contact with the wound surface...'
- 'As Mepilex Lite maintains a moist wound environment, supporting *debridement*, there might be an initial increase in the wound size.'

'Conformable' and 'debridement' would be unknown to most readers. A glossary isn't provided.

In Europe, medicines for consumer use must come with a patient information leaflet, also known as a patient package insert or PPI. These have to pass a clarity test with real customers, the standard being that:

*'A satisfactory test outcome...is when the information requested within the package leaflet can be found by 90% of test participants, of whom 90% can show they understand it. That means to have 16 out of 20 participants able to find the information and answer each question correctly and act appropriately.'* It goes on: *'In approving package leaflets the competent authorities will look for evidence that people who are likely to rely on the package leaflet can understand it and act appropriately.'* (European Commission. *'Guideline on the readability of the labelling and package leaflet of medicinal products for human use'*, also known as *'ENTR/F/2/SF/jr(2009)D/869'*. Brussels, 12 January 2009).

The rules for PPIs don't apply to dressings like Mepilex Lite. We've repeatedly asked the producer, Mölnlycke Health Care, why its leaflet is so unclear but have not yet received a response.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) told us: *'... the basic requirement is for manufacturers to provide the information needed to use the device safely and properly, taking account of the knowledge of the potential users... where the device is intended for a professional user it would be acceptable to use technical terms and where it is used by patients themselves we would expect the language to be simpler for general understanding... The [type] size the information is presented in is not specified in the [relevant EC] Directive but is nonetheless relevant in that it cannot be said to enable the device to be used safely if it is too small to be read and understood.'*

Have you any examples of good or bad leaflets for dressings or medicines that you can share with us? You can scan and email them to us at [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk) or send them by post, anonymously if you wish, to the address on the final page of this issue.

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## Council in Australia bids to clarify parking signs

Mosman Council in Sydney, Australia is proposing what it believes could be a clearer style of parking sign for New South Wales.

It is lobbying the local Roads and Maritime Services department to adopt a 'time-block' model put forward by a designer in Brooklyn, New York, which it says will reduce visual clutter as well as unfair penalties.



'Parking signs are often complicated and difficult to understand with multiple instructions for different parts of the day or week,' the council's proposal to the Local Government New South Wales conference said.

The time-block model was first proposed by freelance designer **Nikki Sylianteng**.

The Sydney Morning Herald's story about the sign has attracted numerous comments, including one advocating electronic solar-powered signs that would tell drivers only the rules relevant to the day and time relevant to when they arrive – a sort of rolling news for prospective parkers. (Thanks to Susan Mckerihan for this story.)

## Street signs in all their glory



**A Grave dearth of clarity** This adorns the gates of an Ipswich cemetery. Is life too short to figure out the meaning? (Thanks to Leigh Parratt.)

**B Ambiguity's a no-no** To park or not to park, that is the question in Whitehaven, Cumbria. (Thanks to Russell Barnes.)

**C Anything goes** Except most of the activities you can think of, somewhere in the United States. (Thanks to Robert Linsky.)

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## ParkingEye's unclear hospital signs rake in £70 penalties

A complex system of parking signs and rules has led to an avalanche of £70 penalties at a hospital car park in Burton, Staffordshire and bitter complaints from hospital patients and visitors. So we visited, took some photos, and found that many of the signs were ambiguous. The car-park's operator, under contract to the hospital trust, is ParkingEye. A new article in our Publications section examines the signs in detail. It shows what happens when the designers of a parking system ignore all the principles of clarity and good legibility. But was it accidental or a deliberate way of making money out of hospital patients? You can decide for yourself by going through the parking quiz included in the article.

The article is 'ParkingEye's unclear signs plague hospital patients and visitors'.

## Rich harvest of proofreading errors

It's been a good autumn for the pesky blighters.

To the Daily Telegraph on 16 Sept for a headline about news of the Scottish referendum vote: 'Expect a result over breakfast.' This could have been a crossword clue, eg swift's first meal of the day (8 letters).

- On 7 Sept, in the Sunday Telegraph: 'She [Muriel Messel] wrote a "Flora Britannica" with a forward by Robinson.' Eek: that would be 'foreword'.
- On 12 Oct, the Mail on Sunday reported Naomi Campbell's tweet to her friend Malalah Yousafzai on winning the Nobel Peace Prize, which also went to the model's 249,000 other Twitter followers: 'Congratulations malaria on your #noble[sic]peaceprize #2014.' Her later apology left pedantic punctuators spluttering, too: 'Darlings my iPhone and I are at odds it seems I type a word it seems to spit out another, forgive me.'
- On 6 Oct, the tennis player Andy Murray wished his terpsichorean mother Judy good luck with her 'performance on STD', an acronym for 'sexually transmitted disease', rather than 'SCD' (Strictly Come Dancing).
- Stateside, the Chicago-based United Airlines was reported in the Daily Mail on 8 Oct as having sent a letter to a disgruntled customer, Chris Chmura, that started with the salutation 'Mr Human' and then referred to him twice more as 'Mr Human'. What? An airline that thinks its customers are, in fact, human beings and not sardines or cattle?

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- Speaking of a visit to India's new Prime Minister by President Xi Jinping of China, a hapless late-night newsreader on India's public broadcaster Doordarshan referred to him as 'Eleven Jinping'. As reported in the Daily Telegraph on 20 Oct, the station's chief executive seemed unimpressed by her knowledge of roman numerals, coining a fine new adjective for 'sacked': 'Please take note: DD (Doordarshan) News Anchor who mispronounced Chinese President's name has been disengaged.'

- On 29 Oct, the Daily Telegraph said a Tesco store in Aberystwyth had tried to appeal to locals by sticking up a cash-machine sign in Welsh. It was supposed to say 'arian am ddim', which means free money, but actually said 'codiad am ddim', which means free erections. Presumably the literal meaning should have been 'free withdrawals', but how much more perilous would that have been in Welsh?

## Annual tax summaries coming

In a move being touted as the last word on clarity concerning UK Government spending, twenty-four million people will soon receive letters showing where their income tax goes. The personalized 'annual tax summary' will include pie charts covering spending on such areas as welfare, health, education and foreign aid.

Someone on a salary of £30,000 will see that £1,663 of it goes on welfare, £1,280 on health, £892 on education, £822 on the state pension and £475 on national debt interest. Whitehall insists the summaries are designed 'to make tax more transparent and easier to understand', with the Chancellor of the Exchequer declaring it to be a 'revolution in transparency'. There will also be an online calculator enabling people to estimate their tax bill and see what it is spent on.

The Trade Union Congress has condemned the move as 'politically motivated', while the right-leaning Taxpayers' Alliance has applauded it as a way of showing people what really happens to their taxes.

The summaries risk misleading the public because they will give only a partial view of where taxes are spent. They won't include details of where the vast sums collected in value added tax, stamp duty land tax and excise duties on alcohol and tobacco go. Such refinements may be added later.

When the summaries appear, we'll be looking closely at how far they fulfil the 'transparency' claims.

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## New book on good writing

Susan McKerihan, long-time friend of Pikestaff and denizen of a small island off the New Zealand coast called Australia, has at last finished her long-promised book, *Clear and Concise*, based on 20 years as a plain-English editor at Coopers & Lybrand and PwC. She's benefited over the years from the help and advice of another good friend of ours, the late-lamented Professor Robert Eagleson. You can see more details of *Clear and Concise* [here](#).



## Old-style 'diagnosis' in terminal decline

It seems the customary use of 'diagnose' and 'diagnosis', words that come from the Greek for 'to distinguish' or 'to know apart', is on its last legs. Everywhere in the mass media, a shift of emphasis has triumphed. The traditional use is summed up in the Encarta World English Dictionary (1999): 'Diagnose means discover or identify. Thus "flu was diagnosed" is correct, and "she was diagnosed with flu" is not correct.' To help explain the meaning of 'diagnosis', the dictionary gives the example 'The diagnosis is flu.'

But Encarta's 'correct' way is certainly not how 'diagnose' is generally used today. Here are a few examples:

- Mrs Burton... was a rep for a travel company before she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. (The Times, 13 Oct)
- In 2013 [Lynda Bellingham] announced she had been diagnosed with colon cancer. (Daily Telegraph, 21 Oct)
- In 2003, [Jack Bruce]... was diagnosed with liver cancer. (Daily Telegraph, 27 Oct)
- One in 10 MS patients wrongly diagnosed or missed altogether (headline). Thousands of people may be being wrongly diagnosed with multiple sclerosis or not being diagnosed at all, health experts warned. (Daily Telegraph, 8 Oct)
- Encarta would have the authors say things like, '...before an aggressive form of breast cancer was diagnosed [in her]' and or 'Liver cancer was diagnosed [in him]', which seems an awkward construction to the modern ear.

The New Fowler's Modern English Usage, edited by Robert Burchill, showed which way the wind was blowing when it said in 1996: 'Properly used to mean "to make a diagnosis of (a disease, a mechanical fault, etc)"... but now often used with a person as object ("a baby who was incorrectly diagnosed as having died before birth, only to be delivered alive, but paralysed, 17 hours later"'. And the New Oxford Dictionary of English took a similar line in 1998, declaring 'diagnose - (usually "be diagnosed")

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identify the nature of the medical condition of (someone): "she was finally diagnosed as having epilepsy"

English usage is very democratic. If enough people choose a new way of using a word, it will gradually supplant the old way or exist in parallel with it. See also cool, wicked, cute.

## Loose chippings from the Tower of Babel (2)

► **Very unique** A seven-foot wide two-bedroomed terraced house in Haringey, north London, is on the market for £235,000 (the average house price in the UK is £189,000). It seems to have been built on a narrow driveway between two houses (planning permission, anybody?). Estate agents described it as 'very unique'; regrettably, such a phrase is far from unique.

► **Outrageous notion** British Gas is running an annoying series of adverts for boilers on Classic FM. Some of the wording is so badly spoken it is hard to catch but it seems to finish with the slogan: 'But that's not all, with our fixed-price guarantee: the price we say is the price you pay.' Could such a novel idea ever catch on with other retailers?

► **Novel idea: let them read a book** A headteachers' leader has argued in a blog that pupils should spend an hour every school day reading a book. This, says Russell Hobby, would do more to improve their skills than 'frantic coaching to the test'. There was too much focus on learning the technical side of reading, he said. 'In the older years of primary school...children just don't read enough. We should strip back the social engineering and the constant initiatives forced on schools and just spend time reading...If all you do is practise analysing different sentences then it becomes a chore rather than a pleasure.'

► **Under the doctor** Jeremy Hunt, the Health Secretary, seems to have been afflicted by an acute case of jargonitis. Using radio interviews to announce an inquiry into the shortage of general practitioners (GPs), he said certain parts of the country were 'significantly underdoctored'.

► **Punctuation turn-off** A Pikestaff reader sends us a well-produced leaflet from Electricity North West warning that the power to her house will be off for a while. She feels that on the whole it's clearly written, and we'd agree, except for these two woefully punctuated sentences: → 'Keep the [fridge and freezer] doors closed to protect the contents, frozen food should last for up to 15 hours without an electricity supply.' → 'Check if your stair lift works using a battery, if not speak to the manufacturer they may be able to help.' We have

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despatched the usual email of complaint, which 'has been noted and passed to the department concerned'. We trust this does not mean 'filed in the floor-level metal container'.

► **Incident of incidence** A newspaper reports: 'Giving evidence in court, sleep expert Dr Chris Idzikowski said *sexsomnia* was a real condition. He said even though McAllister admitted having drunk significant amounts of Martini and vodka at the party [before raping a girl] he may still have suffered a incidence of the condition.' If the expert really did say 'a incidence' (or even 'an incidence'), this would be poor because 'incidence' means the rate or frequency of something, eg 'The incidence of gingivitis in adult men is x%.' The word is also used for the way in which the burden of a tax falls upon the population, eg 'the entire incidence falls upon the workers.' (New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998). It's often misused as a posh synonym for 'incident' or 'instance'. The expert may have meant 'an episode of the condition'. After McCallister's former girlfriend told jurors the only thing she could remember him doing while asleep was snoring, the rapist got seven years. The expert was allowed to go free.

## Pinch of Saffron

A Pikestaff reader has sent us a copy of her furious note to the Saffron Building Society. Last year she'd complained to the society about a particularly obtuse form they'd sent her when an account matured, taking the trouble to phone them up and explain its badness in painstaking detail. Had they listened? Perhaps, but they had not heard, because an identical form arrived at this year's account anniversary. So here is her response:

'Dear Saffron: As I told you last year, this is a useless form designed by an imbecile. I want to open a new Regular Saver but where is the tick-box for this? The [accompanying] letter says it is on this form. Where? The form is abysmal, and it's also a grey, illegible photocopy. Please ask your head of communications to phone me. I would have left the balance [of my account] with you but cannot comprehend the form so have withdrawn it.'

Always protest. Even if they do nothing about it, it will make you feel better. In this case Saffron has apologized and promised to improve.

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## Christopher Staughton, Clarity patron

Sir Christopher Staughton, esteemed and long-serving patron of Clarity, the body that advocates clear legal language, has died at 81. Bright enough to have won a scholarship to Eton in 1946 and another to Magdalene College, Cambridge where he won the George Long prize for Roman Law, Staughton became a barrister and eventually a judge in the Court of Appeal. The Daily Telegraph carried his obituary on 21 Oct: 'Staughton was particularly keen on doing away with archaic language. He once wrote that when a barrister addressing a judge says: "With respect m'lord" he means: "You are wrong"; when he says: "With great respect m'lord" he means: "You are utterly wrong"; and when he says: "With the utmost respect m'lord" he means: "It is time to send for the men in white coats."'

## Lessons have been, will be, are being learned...maybe

The impersonal-passive mantra of choice for officials who have cocked something up, 'lessons have been learned', has had several fresh outings in recent months. On 6 October, West Midlands Police promised that 'lessons will be learned' after the homicidal maniac Harry Street was locked up again, probably for the final time. He had killed five people in the 1970s, was released from Broadmoor 'under supervision' in 1993, and then used his freedom to wage a campaign of terror with an arsenal of weapons against anyone who happened to live near him. The police didn't arrest him or search his house for several years because – cunning plan, this – he changed his name to conceal his real identity.

Meanwhile, the mantra has been taken to a new level by the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board, after much-loved local teacher Ann McGuire was stabbed to death by William Cornick, a 15-year-old student, in April. The board has announced a 'Learning Lessons Review' and publishes a web page dedicated to such reviews, complete with the acronym LLR. The board's home page tells us it consists of 'senior representatives of all the principle agencies'. So that would be 'principal', perhaps, or just 'main' if big words confuse these stellar folk. Yet another lesson to learn!

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## Poverty poorly defined

Much uproar about Unicef, a UN agency, declaring that a quarter of Britain's children live in poverty. It says millions 'have fallen prey to the dangers of austerity' during the recession years (Daily Mail, 29 Oct). But the lack of starving, barefoot waifs on British streets means that even the left-leaning Guardian thinks this kind of analysis is a bit loopy. Its writer John Lanchester (5 Sept) says we need to get rid of the word 'poverty' in the UK context. In the developing world, he says, it refers to the 1.2 billion people living on less than USD1.25 a day. But to be in poverty in the UK means living on 60% of the country's median household income of £23,200 a year, which is £13,920 (as one in five households do). This is a fortune by Third World standards, especially when free education and healthcare are added.

The poverty yardstick means that if the median income rises, the number of people cast into poverty also rises; and if the median income falls, many people are miraculously lifted out of poverty. So Lanchester says poverty today is a far cry from what the founding document of the welfare state, the Beveridge Report, called 'want' – lacking the necessities of subsistence.

The Week (13 Sept) paraphrases Lanchester thus: 'This explains why support for welfare spending is at an all-time low: we don't think these 13 million people really are poor. So let's ban the word "poverty": it just makes a sceptical public feel less kindly towards welfare claimants. Instead, let's call this great scourge of our age by its proper name: inequality.'

Does this really help, though? Parents and carers who, say, help their children to read, write, swim, create computer programs and enjoy the outdoors are promoting inequality as fast as they can go. Would society benefit if they were stopped?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has just proposed that schools should add tooth-brushing to their pupils' daily routine because kids aren't cleaning their teeth at home. Dr Sandra White, director of dental public health at Public Health England, told the Guardian on 22 Oct: 'Tooth decay is the most common oral disease affecting children and young people in England, yet it is largely preventable.'

The epidemic of bad teeth among children, like the epidemics of obesity and illiteracy, can indeed be caused by inequality, not poverty: but this can be the inequality of some parents being too lazy, drunk, drug-addled or dim to do the basics for their kids.

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## Rolling the credits

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