

To the Editor—In *The Back Page* of the October 2008 issue,¹ Margaret Harris Cheng highlights the common error of excluding the article (“the”, ‘a’, or ‘an’) before nouns in manuscripts. Among the reasons cited for editorial “meddling” to correct such errors are first-language interference and the transcription of spoken jargon.

As a former Managing Editor of the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* (1997-2001), and, in those days also the journal’s technical editor, I would like to offer some additional explanations for the incorrect omission of the article in authors’ drafts, drawing from my observations and experience.

One is the common confusion between an uncountable noun referring to a technique and a related countable noun—for example, ‘radiography’ vs ‘X-ray’; hence, ‘chest radiography showed’ may appear incorrectly as ‘chest X-ray showed’; similarly, ‘urine sample showed’ probably really means ‘urinalysis showed’. Another explanation is the use of unclear shortcuts in spoken language, such as ‘CT’ meaning computed tomogram or computed tomography, ‘MRI’ meaning magnetic resonance image or magnetic resonance imaging, and ‘ultrasound’ instead of ‘ultrasonography’, ‘ultrasonogram’, or ‘ultrasound scan’. Confusion about whether the image or procedure is being described can lead to a lost article or the wrong term in the written form.

Adding to the problem for the word ‘X-ray’ is its use by some journals, including this one, to mean both the electromagnetic wave and the image. The word can also be a verb (“He had to have his chest X-rayed”) and, colloquially, a noun referring to the examination (“I had to go for an X-ray”).² Instead of ‘X-ray’, meaning the image, some journals say ‘roentgenogram’, ‘radiograph’, or ‘X-ray film’. But all four terms in the singular require an article or other determiner—such as ‘his’ or ‘her’—unless they modify plural or uncountable nouns (eg, ‘Chest X-ray signs of pneumonia’, ‘Chest X-ray screening’) or appear as a table item or in a figure title or legend.

Finally, explaining that the journal is an international one, Margaret Harris Cheng argued for standardisation and British English usage. In the long-term planning for the journal’s application for Medline

indexing in 2000, it was important to adopt a consistent and widely known journal style, and the stylebook chosen was that of the American Medical Association, now in its 10th edition,³ which is used by the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and many biomedical journals around the world. It was also decided that after the Handover, British English spelling and grammar continue to be used, with the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* being consulted when in doubt. As a result, each style decision in the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* needed (and needs) checks on both *JAMA* and *BMJ* websites (www.jama.ama-assn.org and www.bmj.com) to compare collocations and conventions.

To see how the phrase ‘chest X-ray showed’ is used, I searched the two journal websites and found that although *JAMA* prefers ‘radiograph’ to ‘X-ray’, it is not immune to the occasional absence of articles before either noun (respectively, 2/14 and 1/2 papers incorrect); the one mention of ‘chest X-ray film showed’ was correct. Since 1994, the *BMJ* has correctly placed articles before ‘chest radiograph’ (0/39 incorrect) and ‘chest X-ray film’ (0/21), but not ‘chest X-ray’ (3/20). Incidentally, both journals allow ‘physical examination’ with and without an article, because ‘examination’ can be countable and uncountable. Nevertheless, both journals, and the *Hong Kong Medical Journal*, occasionally commit a double sin by using the jargon phrase ‘Physical examination was normal’, contradicting the rule that “Examinations and laboratory tests and studies are not in themselves abnormal, normal, negative, or positive”.³ The preferred version is ‘Findings from the physical examination were normal’.

So, editors of the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* should continue to research into grammar and style, stick confidently to their chosen style, and carry on “meddling” as appropriate. Keep up the good work!

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References

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2. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. 7th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005.
3. AMA Manual of style. A guide for authors and editors. 10th ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 2007.