

Hundreds of papers by writers from all sections of the profession, and all parts of the world, have crossed my desk over the past few years. One thing unifies most of the papers we receive: regular omission of the definite article ('the') and the indefinite articles ('a' and 'an').

I dutifully insert the appropriate article in front of noun phrases like chest X-ray and full blood count and send the papers back to authors, who, on occasions return the paper with those articles I had painstakingly inserted, equally painstakingly deleted once more.

To be honest, this does not happen very often, but the trend toward leaving out the articles, or sometimes putting one in where it has no business to be, even by authors with otherwise outstanding English writing skills, was so marked that I began to wonder if I was the one with the problem. Was I simply an old-fashioned pernickety editor who could not accept that dropping the article had become standard usage? Should we be accepting this usage as a standard form of Hong Kong English?

So I fell back on the editor's favourite weapon: research. I searched academic papers on the use of the definite and indefinite article to see whether written English had followed spoken English, where "the", "a", and "an" are dropped all the time.

To my fascination I discovered this issue has spawned a whole area of research into linguistics and the acquisition and use of second languages. Particular attention has been paid to language learners whose first languages are Chinese or Japanese because these languages are considered 'non-article' languages where 'the' and 'a' have no equivalent. (There is some controversy over this in Taiwan, but I have not got the space to explain here, unfortunately.)

Daniel Robertson of the University of Leicester¹ found that people with Chinese as a first language tended to leave off the definite article where "information encoded in this feature is recoverable from the context."

Ah! I thought as I read this. That's why everyone writes 'chest X-ray showed' instead of 'the chest X-ray showed' because it is clear that there was a chest X-ray and that this is what it showed. Any hospital resident who insisted on saying 'the chest X-ray', 'the blood tests' and 'the urine sample', as she presented cases during rounds would be considered prissy at best and time-wastingly ponderous at worst.

This also made me wonder whether the articles are left out, not because most of our authors come from a Chinese-language base but because it is standard 'medical speak' in pathology reports, radiology reports, during rounds and handovers. In



hospitals all over the world everyone shortens terms and noun phrases to get the maximum information over in minimum time.

That may explain also why the definite and indefinite articles are left off in front of procedures, tests and investigations but are correctly used elsewhere. For instance most writers correctly refer to 'the patient' not 'patient' who has 'an illness'. I am straying into difficult territory here because illness can be a general concept also and once general it does not need an article—definite or indefinite—to modify it!

So far the arguments for stopping my meddling and leaving it as 'chest X-ray showed' seem compelling. Not compelling enough, however, because written English and spoken English are very different animals. Although American English is significantly different from British English (we use British English at the HKMJ) most of the formal rules are still the same. And the papers we are publishing are attracting more and more international interest, indicated by a rapid rise in our citation rates over the last 2 years.

If we were simply a local journal, writing for a local audience for whom the definite article is an unnecessary adornment, it may be wise to let those articles go the way of the dinosaurs. But with new and interesting research to offer the rest of the world, we need to keep the 'the's' and the 'a's' where they belong so that our readers can focus on our science not our grammar.

MARGARET HARRIS CHENG

Reference

1. Robertson D. Variability in the use of the English article system by Chinese learners of English. *Second Lang Res* 2000;16:135-72.