Extra tips for report writing - 2015

## Examination

1. Describe the body with reference to the anatomical position.

A ridiculously sensible discussion on (wait for it... ) Wikipedia – is worth a look

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatomical_terminology>

1. Examination conditions

e.g. “The subject was examined using room lighting and in the absence of magnification.” Or “XXX was examined with fluorescent overhead lighting and no magnification.”

1. Cooperation

e.g. “XX cooperated well with all aspects of the examination.”

Or “YYY cooperated with some aspects of the examination but would not permit measurements to be made of his height or head circumference.”

Or “ZZZ would not permit examination of any areas of the body other than her arms and legs below her knees.”

1. Areas examined

e.g. “An inspection was conducted of the entire body.” Or “The skin under her underwear was not examined.” Or “An incomplete inspection of his skin occurred because strapping, splints and plasters were not removed” – or words to this effect.

1. FMEK

Please **include the kit number**.

State what went into the FMEK and what did not.

Clothing bags usually do NOT get sealed in the FMEK.

The 2 buccal swabs should be on the outside of the FMEK.

e.g. “The following samples were collected, packaged, sealed, labelled and were replaced in the FMEK ...” “The FMEK was resealed with tamper-indicative tapes.” “Clothing bags (3) and the sample of urine for toxicological analysis was also handed the DSC XXX at ZZZZ (24 hour clock) on (date).”

## Medical jargon

Doctors use the English language in ways that are not universally shared with the English-speaking population at large.

1. Acute.

The word “acute” is often used by doctors and nurses to mean “recent” but can be interpreted by non-medical people such as lawyers, child protection workers and police to mean “sharp” (as in an acute angle not an obtuse angle) or to mean “severe”, “important” or “urgent” as in “Acute Health Care” which is a term used to refer to Emergency Medical Care in Departments of Emergency Medicine (Accident and Emergency Departments). I recommend that the word “acute” is avoided in medico-legal reports unless it is part of a title or you are quoting someone such as a radiologist (e.g. interpretation = an acute fracture which means there is no evidence of bone healing. Another example is an interpretation of a subacute SDH which as we know could mean a number of possible causes/timing.) Using the word “recent” instead of “acute” will minimise the risk of confusing lay readers. I also recommend that when you use the word “recent” that you give readers a sense of what this means in terms of hours, days or weeks.

1. As

The word “as” can legitimately be used as a comparison, as indicated, and as is reasonable in each and every report. ☺ e.g. “as big as a horse” or “as annoying as a mosquito”. What is poor use of the word “as” is as a replacement for the word because. e.g. “She could not attend as she was ill.” The word should be “because”. e.g. “She could not attend because she was ill”.

1. Like

“Like” can be used incorrectly when the author should use the words “such as”. e.g. “The tram track patterned bruising could have been caused by an object like a stick.” The correct way to express this is “... could have been caused by an object such as a stick.”

1. Reflects

e.g. “The bruise reflects blunt force trauma.” I have no idea what this means. Usually a reflection is the mirror image of something. Perhaps the author means that what is seen is merely an image or an apparition (I am not really sure what I am seeing here?) that might be caused by blunt force trauma (or might not). The term suggests to me, as a reader, that the author doesn’t know for certain what they are seeing. I suggest that a better word should be used. Save the word “reflects” for when you “reflect on an idea” by turning it over in your mind or are talking about an image that bends light back to you from a shiny surface.

1. Would be

e.g. “would be consistent”. This is a conditional phrase. The burn would be consistent with a splash from hot oil. I immediately ask “when?” and “why?” Why is the term “would be” used? Under what conditions would the burn be consistent, and why didn’t the author tell me about these conditions if there were some conditions under which the burn would be consistent and some conditions under which it would NOT be consistent? Surely the term that is required here is the word “is”. i.e. “the burn IS consistent ...”

Note that in general the term “consistent” needs to be qualified each time it is used. ALL (yes absolutely all) the differential diagnoses need to be mentioned and their likelihoods discussed. It is absolutely NOT OK to simply mention one possibility, offer an opinion that goes something along the lines of “the findings are consistent with the stated cause” and leave it at that. This is called “confirmatory bias” and it is not acceptable in forensic medico-legal reports.

1. Issues

Some medical professionals use the word “issues” in relation to problems such as “she has mental health issues” and “he has behavioural issues” as a way of hiding information (perhaps in an attempt to protect privacy). This word is an extremely imprecise way of providing information in the child protection field. Please avoid the word “issues” at all costs. If you are given information by someone who uses this word then you must ask that person what they mean.

1. Input

e.g. “She needs medical input.” This is an imprecise “jargonish” way to say ... what exactly? What will Child Protection and the courts make of this? It is unhelpful. I recommend being precise about what you recommend and the word “input” doesn’t tell me what you think this child needs. (Not much thought goes into the word “input”.)

1. Linked in

e.g. “She is linked in with CAMHS.” Surely it is informative to say who sees her (or others in her family) over what period of time, where, and for what reason. This is another “lazy” medical jargon word that conveys next to zero information.

1. Some, Many, Lots, A few

It can be frustratingly challenging to obtain detailed factual information from “difficult historians”. Vague references to “many notifications to Child Protection over the years” or “lots of concerns about this family” are not sufficiently detailed for a good quality VFPMS report. These phrases convey woefully little information. They also convey negative messages to the reader about the diligence and intelligence of the author. Attention to detail appears to be sacrificed and, with this sacrifice there is an increased risk of an erroneous conclusion. Do try to obtain information that you can use in a meaningful way as the basis for your forensic opinion and recommendations. Please.

1. Family

Some paediatricians use the word “family” when they actually mean “mother” and sometimes “father”, or rarely “couple”. Names are always a reasonable way to refer to someone. The word “family” can be used when grammatically correct but please try to avoid it when you would be wiser to use a more precise term. e.g. “I spoke to the family” should be “I spoke with XXX”.

1. The mother, the grandmother

These individuals are not everyone’s mother or grandmother. The term describes a relationship. The words therefore need to refer to the subject e.g. “her mother”, “XX’s grandmother”, “the children’s mother”. The term “the mother” is frequently used in medical circles but is neither courteous/respectful nor is it “good English”. It has no place in high quality VFPMS reports. Even worse is the extremely disrespectful use of the word “Mother” instead of the person’s name. Please don’t ever do this in a VFPMS report or when discussing children with others.

1. Time

Please use either a 24 hour clock or a 12 hour clock accompanied by am or pm. Please do not swap or mix up your choice midway through a report.

1. Dates

Please use one way of referring to dates consistently throughout a report. It doesn’t matter how you do this (e.g. 24/2/14 or 24.02.14 or 24th February 2014 or 24 Feb 2014 or whatever you prefer) but it looks like you cannot focus well and it reflects badly on the author when things such as references to dates “go all over the shop” throughout a report. Be consistent. It goes against your credibility when you are not.

## Child Protection and police jargon

1. DHS

The Victorian Department of Human Services has a number of divisions. <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/our-organisation/organisational-structure>

Even with the new operating model there remain numerous areas of responsibility such as Housing and Disability. When you refer to DHS you probably mean “Child Protection” so therefore make this clear in your report that you mean “Child Protection”, not the entirety of the Department of Human Services or some section of DHS other than Child Protection or Child FIRST. Note that Child FIRST has capital letters for “C” and “FIRST” because FIRST stands for Family Intervention Referral and Support Team. Child FIRST operates within the Family Services part of Child Protection and Family Services.

1. SOCIT

Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team. There is no need to repeat the word “team”. e.g. Bendigo SOCIT. An easy way to refer to police is “Police/DSC XX from Bendigo SOCIT stated that ...”

SOCA is an outdated term. SOCA no longer exist.

1. Concerns

As a word this is a reasonable way to express the “worries” that have led to a report to Child Protection. Please ask for additional information about exactly what these “concerns” are and document as precisely, and in as much detail, as possible what the notifier was worried about.

1. Disclosures, rape, assault, victims and perpetrators/offenders

Judicious and accurate use of these words is a challenge for forensic doctors who must stay away from the ultimate issue (i.e. deciding whether someone is guilty). Words that imply, or worse clearly state, that a crime has been committed must be avoided. Please be careful how you use these words. If the words are quotes then use quotation marks. If in doubt about how words could and should be used then ask senior doctors who understand how medical information must be presented. In NSW they identify possible suspects as “persons of interest” so you might come across this term but it is not widely used by Victorian police. Victorian police use terms such as ‘suspects”, “possible suspects” and “the accused”. The use of people’s names is usually an easy way for medical professionals to avoid an accusation of prejudice against an accused person.

1. Family violence

Also known as “domestic violence”. In the forensic world, in the injury prevention world, and in the WHO field etc., the preferred terms are “interpersonal violence” or “intimate partner violence”. “Exposure to violence in the home” or “in their home” might be a useful phrase to use in relation to children.

1. VARE

SOCIT Police in Victoria video record the formal police interviews with children. VARE is always capitalised because it stands for “visual and audio recorded evidence”. Words such as “VARE interview” can be used. <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/cpmanual/investigation-and-assessment/overview-of-investigation-and-assessment-phase/1178-vate-video-audio-taped-evidence/3>

1. Out of home care

This is the current official and preferred term, rather than “foster care”. Out of home care includes kith and kin placements, family group homes and residential unit placements.

1. Access visits

The Family Court of Australia orders are called Residency and Contact Orders, so it is probably better to term the contacts as “contact visits” rather than “access visits”.

1. Children’s Court of Victoria Orders

The Child Protection website (and the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005*) lists the names of all the orders. Please ensure that information about orders is accurate – or indicate in the report that you are uncertain. You might wish to quote the words used if you are unable to verify the accuracy of information provided to you about orders.

## Simple grammar

1. That

The word “that” needs to be used correctly in order to accurately convey meaning. e.g. “she said yesterday that he hit her” has different meaning to “she said that yesterday he hit her”. To spell it out for those who might remain confused, in the first example the talking occurred yesterday and the hitting occurred at an unspecified time prior to this, whereas in the second example the hitting occurred yesterday and the talking occurred more recently than this.

Please also note that “that” and “which” are not interchangeable terms. “That” indicates a *defining* clause, while “which” indicates a *non-defining* clause. This means that when you use “that”, you are indicating that the information following is essential to the meaning of the sentence. e.g. “XX is wearing a shirt that her mother bought her” – in this example, it is important that XX’s mother bought her the shirt. Compare with “XX is wearing a shirt, which was bought by her mother” – in this example, the emphasis is on the fact that XX is wearing a shirt. That the shirt was bought by her mother is additional information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

1. She said ...

Similarly, the position in the sentence of the reference to the person who told you this information can significantly alter the meaning depending on where in the sentence this information is located. e.g. “on the way to the zoo he said that his father hit his mother” has different meaning to “he said that on the way to the zoo his father hit his mother”. In the first example the talking occurred on the way to the zoo (but not the hitting) and in the second example the hitting occurred on the way to the zoo and the talking to you occurred at a later time.

1. Prepositions

“In” or “over” the holidays – might be better termed “during” the holidays.

1. Where and when

Where refers to a place

When refers to a time

It is appropriate to refer to situations “when” (when you mean at a certain time) and “where” (when you mean in a certain place or places).

e.g. “He always does this when (not where) I annoy him.” Or “when indicated by the circumstances”.

1. A

“A” can sometimes be incorrectly used instead of “each”. e.g. “she attends once a term”. “She attends once each term” or “... once per term” is grammatically correct.

1. Her and her partner... Herself and him

Every good student of grammar knows that it is correct to say “she and her partner went ...” and there is no situation that I can think of that would make “her and her partner ...” grammatically correct. Ever. I am happy to be corrected.

1. Homophones

Be careful when using homophones – words that sound the same but have different spellings and/or meanings.

**Bare** (unclothed/unadorned) / **bear** (black, brown or grizzly/to hold up – weight bearing/ “bear with me”)

**To** (a preposition and adverb) / **too** (also/in addition to)

**There** (indicating a place) / **their** (indicating possession) / **they’re** (contraction of ‘they are’)

**Your** (belonging to you) / **you’re** (contraction of you are)

Not quite a homophone, but – **brought** (past tense of ‘bring’) / **bought** (past tense of ‘buy’)

1. Fewer/less

People often confuse the use of “less” and “fewer”. “Fewer” is a *count noun* and should be used when the object to which it refers can be counted. e.g. “ten items or fewer”, “AA has fewer bruises on his left arm than on his right”.

“Less” is a *mass noun* – use it in sentences where you cannot count the object to which it refers. e.g. “There is less sunshine today than yesterday.” Because you can’t have one sunshine, or two sunshines, “less” is appropriate. The same applies to “greater” and “more”.

1. Might and May

“Might” is possible

“May” is permission

For example, you could say “he might have autism” because this is a diagnostic possibility. As a consultant paediatrician you may officially make this diagnosis and complete forms for Centrelink re the Carer’s Allowance (i.e. you have permission).

1. Potential child abuse

“Potential child abuse” means that child abuse might occur in the future. This means that the subject is deemed to be at risk of child abuse. This child has the potential to be abused. The circumstances under which this child lives create the potential for abuse.

“Potential diagnosis of child abuse” means that the diagnosis of child abuse might be made at some time in the future.

“Possible child abuse” means that child abuse could (possibly) occur but might not.

“Possible diagnosis of child abuse” means that the diagnosis of child abuse is possible.

1. Alleged the allegation of alleged abuse

When the word “alleged” (or “stated” or “said” or “told me that”) is/are used then the word “alleged” is not required as an adjective or adverb. e.g., “she alleged that he allegedly touched her thigh” should become “she alleged that he touched her thigh”. One “alleged” word per sentence is enough.

1. Further and additional

When you see additional bruises or hear additional statements to those already mentioned in your report, they are additional bruises and statements. The word “further” is rarely the best word to use in this context. Furthermore, it can be confused with the word “farther” which refers to distance.

1. Another, but not similar

Sometimes the words “another adult” are used when the subject is merely a child and the person is actually the first adult about whom a reference is made. The words “another adult” when used in relation to the first mention of an adult makes it seem as though you are not paying attention.

1. Last, past and passed.

Last is the end of an absolute span of time “the last ten minutes of a 24 hour period”.

Past is the most recent event in relation a time or event already mentioned. e.g., The forensic collection times mention “the past 12 hours” which refers to the 12 hours prior to sample collection time. The word “last” is incorrect in this context.

Another correct use of the word “past” is as an adverb, e.g. “he flew past the window”.

Passed is a different word altogether e.g. “he passed me the candy-cane” which is the past tense of “pass”.

1. From a fall, due to a fall

The word “from” is perhaps not the best word to use when ascribing cause. “I received a gift from Wendy” is a legitimate use of the word “from” whereas “the abrasion came from a fall” might be better termed “the abrasion is the result of a fall” or better yet, word things as active sentences, e.g., “the fall resulted in an abrasion” or “the fall caused an abrasion”. If you must use passive sentences than perhaps you could say, “the abrasion was caused during the fall”, “the abrasion occurred as a result of the fall” or “the abrasion occurred during the fall”.