

The mouse is mightier than the pen



THE OBLIQUE VIEW

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We continue our series in which Consultant Interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab... and beyond. In this column, he considers electronic communication.

The era of electronic communication has spawned a host of previously unimagined problems with regard to the written word. A recent news item revealed that Google has come up with a system that avoids an email being sent if the writer might, shall we say, be tired and emotional (a euphemism often used in the satirical – and iconic – periodical *Private Eye*, in place of the term 'sloshed'). Before you are allowed to 'send' you have to solve a number of mathematical problems and thereby demonstrate that you are in reasonable possession of your faculties. Now there's an idea ...

In what other ways could the art of e-letter writing be even further enhanced? How might we fine tune our software in order to improve our missives as they fly about the ether? And, in the ever-threatening climate of computer viruses and identity theft, how might we better protect ourselves from others ... and others from ourselves?

Suggested areas for improvement

In order to give William Gates esq. some help, I have listed below some suggestions that could be easily introduced into our network in the hope that value would be added to our e-writing experience. (For all I know some, many, or all of these modifications might be available already from your local family computer store, but ... what the heck.

I was stuck for copy with this issue and the *BJC* was hassling me over the deadline.) See what you think, but bear in mind that these top tips all come under author's copyright, intellectual property legislation and patent law.

1 ■ When you receive an email and press 'reply', the system recognises the manner in which the sender signed off, e.g. "Yours sincerely, Emily Chuckleberry (Ms)" or, "All the best, Chuck", and begins your response accordingly: "Dear Ms Chuckleberry" or, "Hi, Chuck".

Get the idea?

2 ■ On returning from a week's annual leave you come in early on a Monday morning to trawl your mail before the official day begins. As you work through the list in the order in which mail was received, you are particularly taken with one to which you are urged to respond immediately. Having accomplished this task and pressed 'send' with a satisfying sense of efficiency, you are then deflated when, a few mails further up the list (and therefore received subsequently), you see a supplementary message from the same source indicating that any response is unnecessary.

My system would alert you with the phrase, "Before responding, see later mail from same sender". You hit 'return' and see additional information that might modify, if not nullify, your response.

Impressed?

3 ■ If you wish to insert an ellipsis (...) the computer will not let you type more than three dots in a row. Even if you choose to override spell-check and request to 'ignore all' after your ludicrous construction of incessant full stops has been highlighted, it will steadfastly resist. After a series of increasingly severe warnings, it will shut down until you see common sense, at which point it will insist that you complete a short grammar test before you are ever allowed to press 'send' again.

You can envisage a similar approach being taken with inappropriate use of the apostrophe, let alone the semicolon, but I thought it would be preferable to start with a straightforward example, which as you can see, is a bit of a *bete noir* of mine.

4 ■ While I understand the reasoning behind setting up a 'firewall', the security in place in our own institution might still need some tweaking. Occasionally I am notified that incoming jottings from my more 'jovial' correspondents have been barred, and that there is a process of appeal I could pursue if I am minded to (I am usually not). However, I am more puzzled as to why communication from more upstanding sources, such as 'theheart.org' for heaven's sake, is siphoned off to be scrutinised and, presumably, verbally cleansed in the literal equivalent of Guantanamo Bay.

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5. On the same note, and acknowledging that it is our Government's declared intention to monitor and log the content of *all* electronic communication, I can think of a further software modification. When we use certain, shall we say, 'sensitive' words or phrases (I won't mention them here for obvious reasons), a message box springs up and advises "If you use this letter sequence, be aware that you may be visited by Special Branch at four in the morning".

Pause for thought

The following suggestions all relate to a major downside of our modern era, so pay attention.

Responding in writing to letters that cause us to become enraged, used to incorporate what might be regarded as the communication equivalent of the atrioventricular node. An automatic brake was put into the system to avoid rapid conduction and protect the ventricle from overstimulation. We would dictate our infuriated reply but then have to wait for it to be typed, and this pause would give us the opportunity to ponder as to the wisdom of actually posting our vitriol.

This vital delay in the system no longer applies and the result is that all too soon we have sent something that we will live to regret. My system protects us, and the recipients, from such hasty transmissions.

6. First, the audio component of our desktop detects if the email we have opened is producing a higher than normal volume in terms of our welcoming verbal comment (as in, "What the h*** is he on about? He's got a b****y nerve; I'll show him!").

7. The time at which the provocative mail is opened is noted, and the computer does not allow you to send a response without administering a preset time delay to run. (Admit it, you're impressed. But there are even more sophisticated algorithms yet to come into play).

8. The software can detect the phrasing and tone of your response and, as you vent your spleen, will display pop-ups with cautious advice like, "Are you sure you want

to use that term?" or, "Suggest you check the anatomical possibility of actually doing that".

In addition, when you press 'reply to all', it will ask you whether you are *absolutely sure* that you want your response to be seen by all the members of the British Cardiovascular Society (who were rather stupidly copied into the original correspondence you received). A sobering message will be displayed: "Two wrongs don't make a right".

9. Let us assume that, as the red mist descends, you plough on with only one goal in mind. As you bang away, touch sensitive keys translate the pressure applied to gradually emphasise the appearance of words on the screen. With slightly increased force, it converts to *italics* and a little more effort produces **'bold' as well. Finally, when you are hammering as hard as you can with blood oozing from your nail beds, it also underlines, thereby leaving no doubt in the mind of our thus far innocent recipient that you are distinctly unimpressed with his comments.**

10. In severe cases these measures may prove insufficient in distracting you from your single-minded crusade. The modifications described above can be overridden or circumvented, but there is one programme I have devised that is foolproof: the computer screen is not only touch sensitive (just in case, as a result of unrestrained anger, you bash it), but is also chemically coated so as to detect the presence of ... saliva. As you type and yell at the top of your voice, spluttering as you do so, the deposit of spittle on the screen and keyboard is detected and as a result the computer shuts down.

11. Finally, a piece of advice: instead of touching 'send', hit 'save' instead. The software then will not allow you to transmit until the following morning, or next working day, thereby permitting you to 'sleep on it'. (The computer will also eject a 5 mg tablet of diazepam at this point – an updating of its 'snooze' function). When you next open the document in the cold light of day, an ingenious device comes in to play: when you press 'send' the computer is programmed to interpret this instruction instead as 'delete'. Think yourself lucky ●

In brief

New sources of vascular disease information

A new on-line resource from the National Library for Health – the Vascular Specialist Library – has been launched to provide information for both health care professionals and the general public on the prevention, diagnosis and management of diseases of the arteries, veins and the lymphatic system.

The core content of the Vascular Library includes systematic reviews, National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines, health policy initiatives, evaluated patient information, key vascular-related information from general medical and specialist vascular journals and data from national standards, statistics and audits. Visit: www.library.nhs.uk/vascular

The Department of Health has also published guidance for PCTs regarding risk assessment and management for vascular checks. Visit: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_090277

NHS Choices and NHS Direct join forces

Two government websites – NHS Choices and NHS Direct – have joined forces to provide the public with a one stop health information service: www.nhs.uk. The website will give public advice and information about anything from which hospital to choose (including data on hospital comparisons) to checking what symptoms might mean. NHS guides will cover long-term conditions, a health A-Z will cover more than 700 conditions and treatments, answers to common health questions will be given and there will also be an online enquiry service for non-emergency health questions.