

Death of the colon ?

The colon is alive and kicking

Lest I misdirect ardent gastroenterologists on a false spoor, I must say straight away that this piece is about a supposedly moribund punctuation mark, not the large bowel. But before I broach the subject of this essay, I have a little story to tell.

When I chanced recently to read in the WHO editorial style manual (1) published in 1993 this arresting sentence, "The systematic use of the colon as one of a series of different pause-values has almost died out", I knew at once that I had come across it before, somewhere. I did not take long to find the source, for it has been directly lifted from a venerable tome familiar to almost all students of English style (2), which said about the colon in 1954, "All agree that its systematic use as one of a series of pause-values has almost died out".

The frequency with which the colon appears in contemporary writing does not suggest that it is either obsolescent or *in extremis*. Authorities on punctuation seem not to agree fully on its proper place in a series of pause-values, although most of them allow that it is "something less than a full stop and more than a semicolon" (2,3), and proffer advice on its correct use.

The colon is appropriate (2,3,4) when it is used to signal a list or series, delineate sharply the antithesis between statements, and explain or amplify an antecedent clause, as in the following sentences.

- 41 Laboratory investigation gave the following results: fasting blood glucose, 5.0 mmol/l; glycated haemoglobin (HbA_{1c}), 7.2%; serum creatinine, 90 µmol/l; and serum bilirubin 12 µmol/l. (A list.)
- 42 Routine reports of serum electrolytes will only include the following: sodium, chloride, potassium and bicarbonate. (A series.)
- 43 A consultant pathologist should report on the biopsies: in special circumstances a senior registrar may do so. (Delineating antithesis sharply).
- 44 Designing a ward is a complex task: ventilation, lighting, optimum use of available space, location of the nurses' station, patients' sitting and reception areas, and other relevant aspects need careful consideration. (Explanation and amplification).

- 45 The subject of Saul Bellow's biography has actually got what all his contemporaries crave: the Nobel Prize for Literature (Explanation).

The colon should not be used if the sentence is complete and runs smoothly without it (Sentence 46). Avoid using a colon to separate a verb (including all forms of *to be*) from its object (sentences 47 and 48), or after *because* and forms of *include* (sentences 49 and 50).

- 46 To make the solution mix: isotonic saline, phosphate buffer and isotonic dextrose in equal parts. (Omit colon.)
- 47 The agenda for the meeting will be: lighting the lamp, a welcome speech, the oration itself and a vote of thanks. (Omit colon.)
- 48 The lesson we have to learn is: not to catheterise a patient without stringent aseptic precautions. (Omit colon.)
- 49 Polypharmacy is usually ill-advised because: it reduces patient compliance, and increases the risk of adverse effects and drug interactions. (Omit colon.)
- 50 The guest list will include: the line minister, secretary to the ministry and the director-general. (Omit colon.)

The colon is also used to express time (eg. 12:30 hours), to denote ratios (eg. a ratio of 2:1), and in listing references, to separate the title of an article from its subtitle, and volume number from page numbers (eg. 1999; 40: 18-21)

All told, the colon is nowhere near death: it is alive and kicking (sharpening of antithesis, please note!).

References

1. WHO Editorial style manual. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1993.
2. Gowers E. The complete plain words. London: H M Stationery office, 1954.
3. Iverson C. American Medical Association manual of style. 9th Edition. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1998.
4. Carey C V. Mind the stop: brief guide to punctuation. Hammonds worth: Penguin Books, 1971.
5. Huth E J. How to write and publish papers in the medical sciences: 2nd edition. Baltimore: Wilkins and Wilkins, 1990.

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