

## JOHNNY CAN'T READ: (NOR CAN HE WRITE OR SPEAK)

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The lead editorial in the August issue of the *Southern Medical Journal* is written by Rupert Palmer, Jr., Chairman of Vanderbilt's Department of English. Dr. Palmer adds his voice to the many concerned about the lack of ability of present-day youth to read, write and speak English properly.

If you wonder why a medical journal should feature such a basically non-medical editorial, the answer lies in the number of semi-literate, semi-articulate students now moving from colleges into medical schools. If the doctor, member of a supposedly learned profession, can't understand what he reads, can't write a decent sentence and can't communicate adequately through language, his ability to practice intelligently will certainly be limited.

In 1955, Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* upset the professional educationists who had been wallowing happily in promoting the "look-and-say" method of reading to elementary students for nearly two decades. It has taken almost another twenty years to get some instruction in phonics back into the school rooms. However, during that time, the educationists have gone merrily on their way pushing "social adjustment" and instituting new concepts of teaching more concerned with method than with content.

The results of modern public education are painfully evident. The SAT scores continue to drop, and more and more illiterates turn up in college freshman remedial English classes. Today, the high school diploma, the college degree and even some Master's degrees (particularly in the field of education itself) may signify no more than that a warm body has spent the required number of years in a series of "educational" institutions. Private business and industrial corporations find it necessary to set up programs to teach diploma-bearing graduates fundamentals they should have learned as teenagers.

Dr. Palmer identifies many causes that have brought about the problem: failure of schools to teach "grammar"; influence of television; "permissiveness"; substitution of "frills" for "basics"; failure of schools to require reading and writing; and the "engrained anti intellectualism" of high school graduates. His solutions to the problem of improving language facility are: 1) reinstatement of homework in elementary and secondary schools; 2) reestablishment of essay writing to be handed in, corrected, conferred over and then revised by the student; and 3) changing materials assigned for reading assignments to those that display a highly skilled use of language rather than those selected for

contemporary concern or "relevance."

These are laudable aims, but it seems to us that our basic difficulty lies in American public education theory, which, by attempting to educate everyone, has debased the system to accommodate the stupid, and reduced it to such a sterile and low level of computerized conformity that it educates no one. Local school boards who would like to improve quality and content are hamstrung by nonsensical bureaucratic restrictions and regulations imposed by federal and state governments whose funds support most of public education. Teacher certification must conform to idiotic qualifications required by government and national education organizations; and the teachers themselves become frustrated in wastefully occupying their time filling out "necessary" government forms and reports. In the schools, one trouble has been the steady elimination of required courses and the permitting of immature minds to substitute meaningless "electives." Another has been the widespread dependence on the "true-and-false" or "check one" multiple-choice method of testing in order to simplify teaching and reduce the workload of teachers. Still another is the confusing of social studies and vocational instructions with the processes of intellectual education. And finally, the sociopsychological travesty of "social promotion," wherein by eliminating the old-fashioned disgrace and fear of failure one also eliminated the challenge and incentive to improve.

Perhaps this country might take a lesson in education from the modern, democratic Swiss. In Switzerland, all elementary education is compulsory and free, but it lasts for only eight years. Children enter school at 6 to 7 and leave at 14 to 15. After the compulsory years, progression to the middle and higher secondary level is by competitive examination. These are demanding tests and, inevitably, there are many failures. If a student fails, he is given the opportunity to try the examinations once or twice more, up to a certain age. Students who fail competitive examinations are channeled into technical and vocational schools where they undergo apprenticeships between the ages of 14 to 19. Certificates from the higher secondary schools are given in only three categories: 1) classical (with compulsory Latin and Greek); 2) modern languages; and 3) science and mathematics. After completion of secondary education, admission into the university system is, again, only by competitive examination; only the dedicated, the capable, the industrious and the motivated make it.

Out of a total Swiss population of about 6,500,000, there are about 550,000 students at the elementary level; this drops to 325,000 at the secondary level; and at the university level, only 56,000 are in the eight cantonal institutions of higher learning and the one Federal Institute of Technology at Zurich.

What does a system like Switzerland's insure? The Swiss system is, above all, efficient. It weeds out the uneducable and the poorly motivated and diverts them into useful vocational and technical work. From the secondary level on, the educators are not burdened with the apathetic and uninterested. By putting a high premium on the value of education, it ensures that those who do have the ability, the intelligence and the desire will be basically and soundly educated in a broad and true sense. In Switzerland's secondary schools Johnny reads, writes and speaks and usually, in two or three languages.

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