

Editor's Briefing

THE SHAPE OF EVIDENCE

Cormac McCarthy is one of the great American novelists. He was influenced by Hemingway and Faulkner, has been compared with Melville, and won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses* are his masterpieces, the second forming part of the stunning *Border Trilogy*, which also includes *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. Later novels include *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, both made into acclaimed films. McCarthy's style is sparse and idiosyncratic, with little punctuation, no quotation marks and often no attribution of dialogue. Imagine my surprise when a friend sent me an article from *Nature* setting out McCarthy's tips on 'how to write a great science paper'.¹

It turns out that McCarthy has been a fellow at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, where he has helped to edit works by theoretical physicists and biologists, and has worked with an evolutionary biologist, Pamela Yeh. His most important tip is 'to keep it simple while telling a coherent, compelling story.'

McCarthy and Yeh's other words of wisdom include using minimalism to achieve clarity, deciding on the theme and two or three points you want every reader to remember, limiting each paragraph to a single message, keeping sentences short, simply constructed and direct, avoiding footnotes, and not over-elaborating. They have a lot to say about the use of commas, dashes, parentheses and exclamation marks, and recommend injecting questions and using less-formal language to break up tone and 'maintain a friendly feeling.' I can't endorse that strongly enough — it's so refreshing when authors are able to communicate without continually dipping into the tired, stock-in-trade vocabulary of traditional science writing.

What they *don't* do is stress the importance of structure, and how to employ traditional formats to best effect — the well-rehearsed IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) convention. My post-McCarthy comments on these would be as follows.

Use the Introduction to tell a story which, without showing off, draws the reader ineluctably to a clear research question to which he or she will be desperate for you to provide an answer. Make sure that the Methods section is sufficiently detailed, but not tediously so, for other researchers to precisely replicate your work — non-reproducibility is a bugbear undermining

much research in the biomedical sciences. Present the Results in a way which makes their significance for practice or policy explicit. Use the *BJGP's* structure for the Discussion: summary, comparison with other literature, strengths and weaknesses, and implications for research and practice. Doing a good job on the strengths and weaknesses section not only greatly strengthens the persuasiveness of your work but protects you against critical reviews. A concise Implications section means that you have provided a clear answer to the question you set out to address: a rambling Implications generally means that you haven't, or that you didn't define a clear research question in the first place. I hope these comments will help you in thinking about writing for the *BJGP* and reading our articles.

And, focused around the theme of populations at risk, there is plenty to read this month, with articles about vulnerable groups including young carers, older adults who self-harm, children who are bullied, women who are homeless, women with perinatal anxiety and young people with gender dysphoria. Ex-College President Terry Kemple highlights the perils facing the entire planet in an editorial which you will be reading in the wake of the October Extinction Rebellion's attempts to keep climate change at the top of the political agenda. In another editorial, Caroline Frostick and Marcello Bertotti outline the potential benefits of social prescribing, with an accompanying celebration of the world's first Social Prescribing Day in a fascinating — and extended, *Life & Times* section.

An analysis of general practice data by Jessica Lee and colleagues suggests that the exciting experiment in devolution in Greater Manchester has not yet fulfilled its potential to re-distribute funding to practices in highly deprived areas with well-documented extra needs. There is still work to do to ensure that the even greater social experiment — the NHS itself — delivers equitable health care.

Roger Jones,
Editor

REFERENCE

1. Savage V, Yeh P. Novelist Cormac McCarthy's tips on how to write a great science paper. *Nature* 2019; **26 Sep**: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02918-5> [accessed 10 Oct 2019].

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706109>

© British Journal of General Practice 2019; 69: 529–584

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2018 impact factor: 4.434

EDITORIAL OFFICE

30 Euston Square, London, NW1 2FB.
(Tel: 020 3188 7400, Fax: 020 3188 7401).
E-mail: journal@rcgp.org.uk / bjgp.org / @BJGPjournal

PUBLISHED BY

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ISSN 0960-1643 (Print)
ISSN 1478-5242 (Online)

