

Beastly handwriting

It has long been a widely accepted fact among patients, nurses, and pharmacists doctors have far worse handwriting than most other so called learned professionals. Recent studies have largely confirmed this popular belief, one such study (1979) finding that 16% of doctors wrote quite illegibly and that another 17% were barely legible.

Why doctors should write so badly is not quite clear, and it is improbable that they are still trying to keep secret the contents of their prescriptions. Even more implausible explanations are defective toilet training and a collective "Disorder of Written Expression" (code 315.2). It is more likely that poor handwriting is caused by bad habits acquired while taking lecture notes in medical school; by excessive modern documentation requirements; or by just being too plain busy.

Good handwriting in the old days was achieved with ink dipping pens that smudged the paper and stained the fingers. Even fountain pens, though invented around 1884, were thought to be incompatible with a neat hand, and ballpoints were definitely the devil's invention. Many graduates nowadays eschew even these satanic instruments, having typed their essays in college or used laptops ever since first put in the playpen. Accordingly, a neat hand has become a rare phenomenon.

Illegible writing may result in dreadful medical mishaps, and while the future may well belong to computers and word recognition transcription machines, several institutions have tried to improve matters by offering remedial penmanship classes. Handwriting specialists have sprung up like mushrooms, some with their own website, some advising a change from the cursive baroque to the loop-free italic style with letters largely separate rather than joined. Others recommend going back to fountain pens, which tend to slow one down and thereby improve legibility.

Last year, on impulse, I bought such a device, a non-refillable disposable fountain pen, available in the United States and also in the United Kingdom. I have used these pens ever since, and also gave some to a colleague badly in need of them, with quite good results. I must say that unfortunately the clip tends to break off rather easily. Nevertheless, I can recommend these pens highly, as a modest means of achieving an extra modicum of legibility