Editorial board

A publication from the BMA Science and Education Department and the equal opportunities committee.

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This guidance was prepared under the auspices of the equal opportunities committee of the British Medical Association, whose membership for 2005/06 is as follows.

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Introduction

BMA equal opportunities statement

The British Medical Association is committed to equality in the provision of its services to its members and stakeholders. This ensures that all members, those applying for membership, and other service users will receive the highest possible standards of service from the BMA, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, disability, chronic illness, religion or beliefs.

Our equal opportunities policy has been developed to ensure that BMA members and staff are fully aware of our commitment to provide equality of opportunity in all of our functions. Furthermore, the BMA will monitor the implementation and application of our equal opportunities policy and ensure that it reflects and meets the requirements of the increasingly diverse membership, which we seek to serve.

One important way in which the BMA can affirm its commitment to the principles set out in the equal opportunities statement is through the use of non-discriminatory language. This guidance aims to promote good practice in using language in an inclusive way, which shows respect for, and sensitivity towards, all members of the community. The choice of appropriate words makes an important contribution to the celebration of diversity. As well as avoiding offence, it is about treating each other with dignity and as equal members of an integrated community.

Language is, of course, dynamic and terms disappear, re-emerge and are revised. Everyone needs to be sensitive to changing expressions and meanings in everyday usage, as they emerge. This guidance is, therefore, not a static document, but will be subject to review and revision when required.

The guidance in this document should be applied to all mediums of communication, including committee papers, documents, letters, emails and the website. Anything produced by the BMA reflects the organisation and it is, therefore, vital that all documents are free from discriminatory language, or what others could construe as discriminatory language. The way in which language is used can also reflect positively on an organisation, showing it to be inclusive and thereby promoting representation and full participation from all diversity groups. It is acknowledged that changes required to adapt existing documents, publications and databases could have large time and cost implications. Therefore, these recommendations should be applied when such systems are being reviewed or revised for other purposes.

Some examples of good practice in the use of non-discriminatory language throughout the association are included in this document for illustration. If you are aware of any other examples of good practice that you would like to be included in future editions of this publication, please send them to the equal opportunities committee secretariat, in the Science and Education Department.
What is discriminatory language?

Discriminatory language includes words and phrases that:
- reinforce stereotypes
- exclude certain groups of people by assuming that, for example, the male or white population is the norm
- patronise or trivialise certain people or groups
- cause discomfort or offence
- make good and effective communication difficult, eg by excluding part of the target audience.

Why should it be avoided?

Language is important in portraying and shaping perceptions and attitudes and it is not neutral or value free. The language we use reflects as well as reinforces the values, beliefs and prejudices of the culture or society to which we belong. This includes the culture and customs that exist within organisations, such as the BMA and the NHS. Bad practices can contribute to the culture of an organisation being seen as, for example, institutionally racist. Language, therefore, not only reflects the discriminatory values and practices of our society or organisation, but also maintains them. If we stop using discriminatory language, this will be an important step towards changing our perception of what is appropriate or acceptable.

Particular words can exclude or devalue people. Discriminatory language can inhibit or prevent achievement, by demeaning, offending or stereotyping individuals or groups of people. Imposing labels on specific groups of people conveys the impression that all individuals within such a group share the same characteristics. This fails to acknowledge the diversity within that group and has the effect of isolating the group described.

What is non-discriminatory language?

Non-discriminatory language includes words and phrases that treat all people equitably and fairly. It does not discriminate against people on the basis of:
- gender
- sexual orientation
- race, colour, nationality or ethnicity
- disability, impairment or condition
- religious belief or absence of such belief
- age
- political opinions or beliefs.

Gender

Gender neutral language avoids stereotyping people according to their sex. Although stereotyping can affect men adversely, women are more often affected because former convention was to assume that an individual of unknown gender was male, or to use male gendered language to cover both sexes.

Do not assume that a person is male

Traditional guidance has been that if you do not know the gender of a person, you should assume they are male – this is now incorrect.
- Where you do not know and cannot find out the correct gender, address your correspondence Dear Ms/Mr Williams, if you know the family name; Dear Sir/Madam if you do not.
- Where you know the first name, but not the gender of the person, you should address your correspondence Dear Chris Williams, not Dear Ms/Mr Williams.
- On forms ask the individual to select from a comprehensive alphabetical list of titles, or leave the field blank for people to complete.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful hints</th>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where you do not know and cannot find out the correct gender of a correspondent</td>
<td>Dear Mr [NAME] or Dear Sir</td>
<td>Dear Ms/Mr [NAME] if you know the family name, or Dear Sir/Madam if you do not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where you know the first name, but not the gender of the correspondent</td>
<td>Dear Ms/Mr [NAME]</td>
<td>Dear [FIRST NAME] [FAMILY NAME], eg Dear Chris Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On forms, ask individuals to select from a comprehensive alphabetical list of titles, and/or leave the field blank for them to complete. Ideally, do not put the list into a perceived hierarchy</td>
<td>Prof&lt;br&gt;Dr&lt;br&gt;Mr&lt;br&gt;Mrs&lt;br&gt;Miss&lt;br&gt;Ms&lt;br&gt;Other</td>
<td>Dr&lt;br&gt;Miss&lt;br&gt;Mr&lt;br&gt;Mrs&lt;br&gt;Ms&lt;br&gt;Prof&lt;br&gt;Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid using he, his, him to apply to both sexes. Use he, his, him, himself only when referring specifically to a male person. Instead of referring to both sexes with words such as he, him, his, use terms that cover both, eg ‘s/he’, ‘she or he’, ‘they’</td>
<td>The lecturer will display his timetable on his office door&lt;br&gt;Each student is responsible for material on loan to him</td>
<td>Lecturers will display their timetables on their office doors&lt;br&gt;Students are responsible for material they borrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid using his or her after each, someone, anyone, nobody</td>
<td>Anyone who wants his work evaluated</td>
<td>Anyone who wants their work evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid using man to mean people in general. It is not good practice to present material with the disclaimer that all masculine nouns and pronouns are to be taken as referring to both females and males</td>
<td>Man or mankind&lt;br&gt;Man-hours&lt;br&gt;Manpower</td>
<td>Humanity, humans, human beings, people, or society&lt;br&gt;Work hours or staff time&lt;br&gt;Staff, workforce, personnel, workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid using terms that may give offence to women or men</td>
<td>Girls, Ladies, Dear, Son, Love</td>
<td>The person's name, their professional title, or men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous gender descriptions</td>
<td>A woman doctor&lt;br&gt;A male nurse</td>
<td>A doctor&lt;br&gt;A nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid using Miss/Mrs unless the individual concerned expressly indicates that they wish otherwise</td>
<td>Miss/Mrs</td>
<td>Ms – This term is intended to parallel Mr as it does not identify marital status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid titles that imply that the normal job-holder is of a particular gender</td>
<td>Chairman&lt;br&gt;Policeman&lt;br&gt;Cleaning ladies</td>
<td>Chair, chairperson&lt;br&gt;Police officer&lt;br&gt;Cleaners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transgender people
The Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004 allows transsexual people to apply for full legal recognition in their acquired gender. Following a successful application, the law regards the transsexual person as being of their acquired gender and therefore they receive all of the rights and responsibilities of that gender. Equal opportunities policies should refer to discrimination on grounds of gender, and this includes gender identity. Transsexual is this term used in the GRA, however, transgender may be preferred by some individuals mostly because its moves away from the sensitive ‘sexual’ word and focuses more appropriately on the gender role.

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<th>Helpful hints</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use the term trans/transsexual/transgender as an adjective rather than a noun</td>
<td>A transsexual</td>
<td>Transsexual/transgender person or trans person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you must use a gender specific pronoun, use the term preferred by the individual</td>
<td>She or her (for a trans-male, ie female to male) He or his (for a trans-female, ie male to female)</td>
<td>He or his</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These new rights have numerous implications for good practice in the workplace and for human resources including, the provision of support during the transition process, confidentiality amongst colleagues, dress code and the use of single-sex facilities. It is unlawful to disclose someone’s birth gender after they have been given a new birth certificate.

Further information can be found in the Women and Equality Unit’s publication Gender reassignment – a guide for employers (2005).

The BMA and gendered language
Equal opportunities monitoring of BMA committees reveals that women are under-represented on committees. In the 2004-05 session, the average gender composition is 19 per cent female, compared to the medical workforce which is 24-52 per cent female depending on grade/specialty. Furthermore, in the last 20 years only 10 women have chaired a craft or standing committee compared with 63 men.

The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) states that ‘... use of a job description with a sexual connotation shall be taken to indicate an intention to discriminate, unless the advertisement contains an indication to the contrary’. The Act would apply in the case of committee membership as involvement in BMA politics could be regarded as a career move, i.e. providing a career in medico-politics. Although there are no financial incentives attached to the chairing of a committee, there are political and status benefits.

Reference to gender in the title of ‘chairman’ is not considered a ‘genuine occupational requirement’ under UK law. It is also discouraged by the Equal Opportunities Commission in, for example, its guidance literature on advertising.

If challenged, the onus would fall upon the Association to demonstrate that it does not have, or promote, any gender preference whatsoever in supporting or encouraging candidates for election. A factor of major significance that would be taken into consideration would be whether the current number of female chairs is proportional (which it is not). In the event that a member challenges access to leadership positions on the grounds of sex discrimination the Association may be
liable. Should equality of access to senior positions be contested, the terminology chosen may affect the ability of the Association to defend its motivation. This is particularly relevant as the Burden of Proof Directive has changed the way that challenges under the Sex Discrimination Act are handled. ¹

Examples of BMA good practice

The BMA’s contacts database provides the following alphabetical list of titles to choose from:
Dame
Dr
Miss
Mr
Mrs
Ms
Professor
Rev
Rt Hon
Rt Hon Rev
Sir

It is best practice within the BMA to use language which avoids gender discrimination and it is increasingly used by the majority of committees for all communications. The equal opportunities committee and patient liaison group use the terms ‘co-chairs’, ‘chair person’ and ‘deputy chair’.

Sexual orientation

Language is often used in a way which ignores the fact that a significant proportion of the population is not heterosexual. Be careful not to make assumptions about people’s personal circumstances. For example, do not use terminology that assumes that everyone has partner(s) of the opposite sex. The following terms are associated with sexual orientation:

Homosexual: Although this term is not considered offensive, it is not usually used by lesbians and gay men.

Gay: A man whose primary sexual and emotional attraction is towards other men. The preferred term to describe homosexual men. It is sometimes also used by lesbians to describe themselves.

Lesbian: A woman whose primary sexual and emotional attraction is towards other women. Some lesbian women prefer to be referred to as gay women.

Bisexual: A man or woman who is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of both sexes. There is ongoing debate over this term, but for the present it remains generally accepted and used.

¹ Once a prima facie case of sex discrimination has been established by a tribunal (that is, they accept that there is a case to be answered) the burden of proof shifts from the applicant to the employer to show that there was a non-discriminatory reason for their actions.
### Helpful hints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use the term preferred by the individual</th>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The blanket term homosexual</td>
<td>Gay, lesbian, bisexual, gay man, gay woman²</td>
<td>Use all these terms to describe these groups/individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>LGB is a common acronym used for the collective term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone’s sexual orientation | Lesbians, gays or bisexuals | People who are lesbian, gay or bisexual |

| Avoid using heterosexual-centred language. Such language is based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal, valid or moral basis for partnerships | Husband, wife and spouse, Girlfriend or boyfriend, Family planning clinic | Partner or accompanying person (so as to not discriminate between married, unmarried or same sex partners), Partner (or term preferred by individual), Sexual health clinic or sexual health and wellbeing clinic |

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² You may come across terms such as queer, queen or dyke which may be used by an individual to describe their identity. In a professional environment it would be preferable to use the terms gay, lesbian or bisexual unless specifically requested by the individual.
Civil Partnerships
Since 21 December 2005 same sex couples have been able to form a legal relationship, known as a civil partnership. Couples who form a civil partnership have a new legal status – that of a ‘civil partner’. The couple gain rights and responsibilities similar to that of a marriage. A civil partnership ends only on a formal dissolution or annulment, or on the death of one of the parties.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application forms and equal opportunities monitoring forms should be amended to include this new legal relationship status</td>
<td>Asking someone’s marital status or specifying marital status options: single married divorced widow/widower</td>
<td>What is your relationship status? or What is your marital/civil partnership status? Relationship status options: single married/civil partner divorced/dissolved civil partnership widow/widower/surviving civil partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of BMA good practice
The BMAs membership database uses the term ‘partner’ rather than ‘husband, wife or spouse’.
Race, colour, nationality and ethnicity

Racist language promotes and maintains attitudes that stereotype people according to the colour of their skin and their racial origin. Race is an area where language changes particularly quickly and what is acceptable to some may not be to others. It is best to be guided by the terms people use to describe themselves.

In addition, only use a person's race to identify, or describe, them, if it is directly relevant to the point you are making. Do not assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality or cultural background.

No human being is just one thing and, therefore, no one can be summarised with a single word. Cultures and identities are continually changing, not least because of the interactions they have with each other. Terms such as Black British, British Muslim, South Asian British, and so on, are often appropriate.

Difficulties can arise with expressions that use ‘black’ in a negative way (for example, black sheep, or black mark). Although these expressions did not arise in a racial context, they may be considered insensitive. Only use the term black to describe things that are of that colour, for example, black coffee.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone’s race</td>
<td>The Asians etc…</td>
<td>Asian students etc…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous ethnic descriptions</td>
<td>A Chinese professor</td>
<td>A professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to always allow people to define themselves.</td>
<td>Coloured people</td>
<td>The term preferred by the individual, eg Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Black etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Asian when referring to all minority ethnic groups</td>
<td>Black people only when referring to people of African or Caribbean heritage. Some groups (particularly Asian and Chinese) prefer not to be referred to by this term. This is a very broad term and in some circumstances may not be an acceptable description of someone’s identity and a more focused term is needed, eg a national reference such as Bangladeshi, Gujarati, Pakistani, Punjabi, or else a religious one such as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Make documents available in other languages, where appropriate
This is good practice if a large proportion of the intended audience are not native English speakers. However, the level of provision will depend on the resources available.

The Welsh Language Act 1993 places a duty on the public sector to treat the Welsh and English languages on an equal basis, when providing services to the public in Wales. Organisations in the public sector include local authorities, health trusts, courts and government agencies and departments (including organisations outside Wales), which provide services to people in Wales. The Act does not place a direct legal obligation on private businesses or voluntary organisations to offer services in Welsh. However, many companies and voluntary organisations have developed bilingual policies. Providing a bilingual service is rapidly becoming recognised as a mark of quality in Wales where it can increase loyalty, attract new customers/clients and harness goodwill.

Disability

Avoid describing disabled people in a way that is insensitive and patronising. The Social Model of Disability describes how people with impairments are disabled by barriers created by the environment, which can therefore prevent them from taking part in everyday life. Try to use language, or images, which always describe or show disabled people in an active rather than passive role. Do not use terminology that tends to emphasise the impairment rather than the person – the most important thing is that they are people first and foremost. Do not refer to a person’s impairment or access requirements unnecessarily, only under circumstances in which either of these are relevant should they be mentioned.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 states that service providers must make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access. These adjustments must also be made when interviewing prospective employees. It is acceptable before or during an interview to ask about what adjustments are needed but it is not acceptable to ask about a person’s impairment specifically. When arranging a meeting you must ensure that there are sufficient access arrangements and check with all those attending whether they will require any specific resources, such as Braille materials. Employers and trade organisations also, for example, have a duty to use a British Sign Language/English interpreter if it means that otherwise a hearing impaired employee is placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with non-disabled people.

The DDA 1995 is amended by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 to contain the Disability Equality Duty which will come into force 5 December 2006. This will place a duty on all public bodies to promote disability equality. This duty will have a significant impact on the way in which all public services are run and on improving the lives of disabled people. Promotion of disability equality within the BMA is good practice. The DDA 2005 will extend the coverage of the DDA 1995 to include people with cancer, HIV infection and multiple sclerosis and will revise the definition of mental illness by removing the requirement that it must be a ‘clinically well recognised illness’.
### Helpful hints

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<th>Instead of</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The disabled</td>
<td>Disabled people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The blind</td>
<td>People with visual impairments, people who are partially sighted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair-bound</td>
<td>Wheelchair user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An asthmatic</td>
<td>An asthmatic person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Avoid blanket expressions that refer only to the impairment. Make it clear that you are talking about a person. People should not be identified or defined in terms of any impairment that they may have. Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone’s impairment. The general rule is ‘put people first’.

Use the correct term for the impairment. Avoid terms that are now considered offensive.

- Spastic
- Mongol
- Mentally handicapped

If it is necessary to refer to a person’s impairment or condition, check with the individual how they wish it to be described.

- Person with cerebral palsy
- Person with Down's syndrome
- Person with learning difficulties

Talk about disabling barriers and solutions.

Avoid implying that people with impairments are less fortunate, are ‘suffering’, present a ‘problem’, or require any special treatment.

- Please let the organisers know if you cannot use stairs
- Special arrangements have been made to accommodate deaf people

Please let us know if you require any assistance, to enable you to attend/participate. If you would like to discuss your access requirements further, please contact…

The facilities are equipped with loop hearing systems.

Avoid any implication that a physical impairment implies a learning difficulty.

- Posing questions to others, eg would they like some coffee? Does he take sugar?
- Speak to the individual themselves, eg would you like some coffee?

Someone with learning difficulties does not necessarily have low or high intelligence, or any innate inability to learn. It specifically means that they have an impairment that is less suited to normal teaching methods.

- Speaking slowly and assuming low intelligence
- Speak in your normal manner and tone

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Religion or belief

You should not make assumptions about individuals based on their professed religion or belief system. Not all members of each religion follow the same practices and observances. Some of the most commonly practiced religions and beliefs in Britain are: (2001 census)

- Christianity
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Sikhism
- Judaism
- Buddhism

Further guidance on these religions and the requirements of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 is provided by ACAS. Further information can be found in the BBC Guide to Religion: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/)

### Helpful Hints

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian name</td>
<td>First name, given name, forename or personal name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surname</td>
<td>Family name (preferred term). Surname is not unacceptable. However, this word may originate from sire-name, or the name derived from one’s father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last name</td>
<td>This term should not be used as it could be confusing to Asian groups who place their family name first</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Example of BMA good practice

The conference unit uses the terms family name and first name in application forms.

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4 It is acceptable to use the term first name in conjunction with family name, even though Asian groups traditionally place their family name first, since the latter qualifies what is being requested.
Age

It is good practice to avoid terms that may be perceived as a manifestation of ageism. Ageism is found in negative, derogatory or abusive language which can be targeted towards people of any age – young and old. Age discrimination can be a serious barrier to younger and older people playing an equal part in society.

Do not assume that older people are in poor health; many older people are in good general health, although the prevalence of illness and disability tends to rise steeply over the age of 80.

From 1 October 2006 the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations make age discrimination illegal in all employment sectors and vocational training. The regulations cover recruitment, terms and conditions, promotions, transfers, dismissals and training. Recruitment is the primary area where the language used will have to be adapted. Job descriptions cannot ask for a number of years experience and a job advertisement cannot include language that might imply that the employer would prefer someone of a certain age, such as ‘mature’, or ‘young’.

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When defining age ranges do not exclude older age groups. Age cut-off points are one of the major ways in which the older population are excluded</td>
<td>Under 1, 1–9, 10–19, 20–34, 35–54, 55–65</td>
<td>Under 20, 20–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, 65–69, 70+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the preferred term. Language changes and evolves</td>
<td>The elderly, aged, old people, senior citizen, pensioner</td>
<td>Older person, older people, older citizens, older adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When writing job descriptions and job/committee seat advertisements, focus on the skills and aptitudes required for the post rather than number of years of experience, or age</td>
<td>So many years experience</td>
<td>Use words relating to the desired attributes of an applicant: proven experience, adaptable, enthusiastic person, reliable, good communication skills etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature</td>
<td>Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When interviewing candidates, try to avoid asking questions related to age, instead concentrate on the applicants’ competencies</td>
<td>How would you feel about managing older/younger people?</td>
<td>What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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Example of BMA good practice

The Science and Education Department’s web resource on healthy ageing uses the term ‘older people’ throughout.