

## Rigor in Medical Writing: Quoting Accurately

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Medical writing is a difficult task. It is not like writing a story or a work of fiction. In medical and other scientific articles, the author must strive for clarity, economy of words, and accuracy. If a study or procedure is described, it must be described in sufficient detail that a reasonably knowledgeable colleague could replicate the process. In osteopathic medicine, the words of Andrew Taylor Still, MD, DO, are often quoted to prove a point or buttress an argument. But what if the quote is not really what Still said or wrote? What does that say about the credibility and scholarship of the author? What if the misquote actually alters Still's meaning?

There is a profound reason why the original founding documents of the United States—the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—are kept in very high-security storage (besides the value of seeing original documents). Without the originals, it would be possible to alter them in subtle ways that would change the meaning or interpretation of what they say. Who could prove that the altered documents had indeed been altered from the originals? Likewise, it is very important when quoting Still (or any other communication) that the quote be completely accurate and verifiable.

In her well-reasoned and documented article, "Quoting A.T. Still with Rigor: An Historical and Academic Review,"<sup>1</sup> Jane Eliza Stark, BSc, D.O.M.P., presents a compelling rationale for making sure that quotes are accurate. She cites a number of instances in which supposedly well-known Still quotes have been subtly or even radically altered by the quoting author. She makes the argument that in many instances, this has been a result of authors quoting Still from Webster's book, *Sage Sayings of Still*,<sup>2</sup> or from Truhlar's book, *Doctor A.T. Still in the Living*.<sup>3</sup> There are errors in both books, and, indeed, many of the so-called quotes are not even referenced as to where they are found in Still's works or when he said them. She points out that in some cases, it has been difficult to find original copies of Still's works, but that now essentially all of them are readily available through various sources, and most are on the Internet.

One book in particular has been problematic; Still's third book, *The Philosophy and Mechanical Principles of Osteopathy*,<sup>4</sup> can be difficult to find in its original form, and uncertainty exists regarding its printing date. Stark makes a good case for believing that although parts of this book may have been written in 1892, it almost certainly was published in 1902. However, Still recalled most copies of the book, and it was not until 1986 that a copy provided by Still's granddaughter, Jane Denslow, was reprinted and became widely available. (As an aside, I have in my collection of early osteopathic works 2 original copies of *The Philosophy and Mechanical Principles of Osteopathy*. One of these copies has a page with Still's writing and signa-

ture, dedicating the copy to the son of Mrs Ivy in Kirksville. Still did not get all copies recalled.)

As a result of the use of inaccurate sources, many of Still's quotes in the literature are questionable. However, it is incumbent on current authors to do the intellectually honest work of fully researching any quote, Still's or otherwise, and acknowledging it accurately from original sources. To do otherwise risks altering the original author's meaning or intent and diluting the quoting author's credibility.

### References

1. Stark JE. Quoting A.T. Still with rigor: an historical and academic review. *J Am Osteopath Assoc*. 2012;112(6):366-373.
2. Webster GV, ed. *Sage Sayings of Still: Selected from the Writings of Dr. A. T. Still, Founder of Osteopathy; With a Historical Sketch of Osteopathy and an Appreciation of Dr. Still*. Los Angeles, CA: Wetzel Publishing Co, Inc; 1935.
3. Truhlar RE, ed. *Doctor A. T. Still in the Living: His Concepts and Principles of Health and Disease*. Cleveland, OH: privately published; 1950.
4. Still AT. *The Philosophy and Mechanical Principles of Osteopathy*. Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly Pub Co; 1902.

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