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<b>Description</b>	Signs of bad English found in various parts of Singapore. (Part 3 of 4)		

# Clinical English

This is the third of a four-part series on the Speak Good English Movement by The Straits Times. April Chong trawls health-care institutions here for signs displaying bad English.

NO ONE seems to care, or even notice, that some of the signs in hospitals and polyclinics display bouts of bad English.

Most either say they cannot read English or are not sure what is wrong. And they do not feel that bad English is a problem, as long as the signs are understandable.

In fact, there were not many mistakes on the signs and most were not obvious at first glance.

Many of the errors were the result of truncation or poor use of prepositions or tenses. Spelling did not seem to be a problem and there was nothing to make the reader collapse in laughter.

For example, one sign outside a hospital read: "Steps of putting on surgical mask." Not one of the 10 people The Straits Times interviewed could find any fault with it.

Engineer Jack Ang, 46, who was visiting his mother who was ill, stared hard at the sign before asking: "Is there anything wrong?"

But quite a few signs demonstrated problems with prepositions, which language expert K.K. Seet said is one weakness in Singaporeans' command of the English language.

Some of the polyclinics and hospitals admitted that their signs, especially the "do-it-yourself" variety, are usually made by staff from individual sections and therefore not subject to quality control.

Some of these signs have been removed or replaced after queries from The Straits Times.

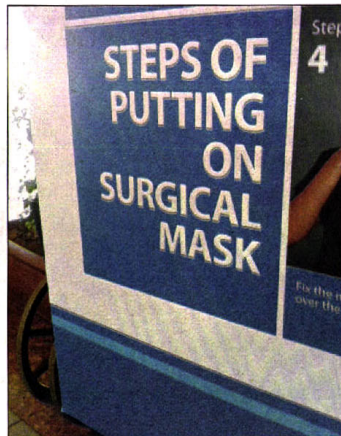
Bad English appears to be more common in polyclinics than hospitals, but the largely middle-aged and elderly crowd at such places seems oblivious.

Many cannot read English anyway and rely on asking people if they are not sure what to do.

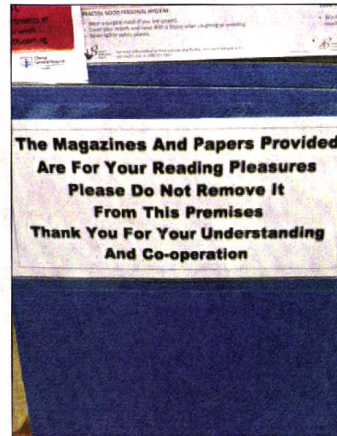
Retiree Cheng Man Wook, 70, who was at a polyclinic because of his high blood pressure, said: "My own English is not very good. As long as can understand, can already."

And no one, including foreign patients, seems to connect poor English with health-care standards.

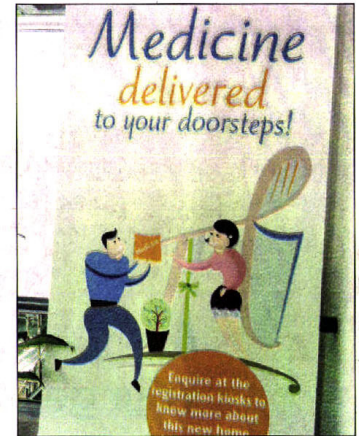
Indonesian banker Janice Sabardi, 33, who was accompanying her sister to a private hospital for surgery, said: "What is more important is saving lives."



■ Should have been steps "for" putting on surgical mask instead. Prepositions are not a strong suit of most Singaporeans.



■ Pleasure is generally singular unless one is making a case for a variety of different pleasures. Papers is understood these days to be the abbreviated form for newspapers. All the first sentence needs is to invert the words "provided" and "are" for the sentence to read: "The magazines and (news) papers are provided for your reading pleasures." Since one imagines a number of magazines and newspapers, the pronoun should be "them" rather than "it". Moreover, "premises" already refers to the current space so "the premises" will do, instead of "this premises" which sounds redundant and also ungrammatical.



■ The assumption is a delivery to more than one home, hence the erroneous pluralisation of "doorsteps", when "doorstep" would have sufficed.

Dr K.K. Seet is a theatre studies lecturer from the National University of Singapore. The effectively bilingual Singaporean has served as a chairman and judge on several English language literary committees, and is author of 10 books.