American English is a very complex and sometimes confusing language. It poses significant challenges to those attempting to learn it because it is the product of so many different languages. I once had a friend who was so fascinated with the English language that he kept a copy of the Webster’s unabridged dictionary next to his bed, and each night, before turning in, he would read and memorize two pages from the dictionary. He didn’t get out much, but he did know his language.

The earliest inhabitants of the British Island, where our language originated, were a mix of local Celts, occupying Romans who spoke Latin, and invading Angles and Saxons. To the Romans we owe words such as wine, cheese, butter and cheap. Things that reflected the influence of trading, for which the Romans were well known.

When the Roman influence declined, it was replaced by the Norseman (Vikings). The Norse added a formal structure to the English language with terms such as sky, law, egg, outlaw, and talk.

The Norman Conquest was the next wave to influence the English language, introducing French terms into religious and governmental entities. We learned new ways to describe food (veal, beef, mutton), colors (blue, scarlet), and words for entertainment and play (dance, chess, music, conversation).

To further complicate an already complicated language, we in the U.S. are famous for creating a short hand form of cultural communication that is both subtle and powerful. We often find ourselves speaking in buzz words and catch phrases.

**BUZZ WORDS**

A buzzword is commonly used in managerial, administrative, and sometimes political environments. Buzzwords are typically intended to create the impression of knowledge for a wide audience. They tend to be non-controversial and universal. They can also be a cryptic shorthand for those “in the know.”
Take, for example,

- **Breakthrough**
- **Empowerment**
- **Paradigm Shift**
- **Sustainability**
- **Synergy**
- **Benchmarking**
- **Value-added**

**Catch Phrase**

A *catch phrase* is a phrase or expression that has become popular in American culture and, after repeated usage in everyday language, “catches on” and becomes an easily recognized part of our language.

*“Show me the money!”*: Key phrase of fictional pro football player Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding Jr.’s Academy Award winning role); repeated loudly by Tom Cruise as the title character in *Jerry Maguire*

*“Where’s the Beef?”*: Clara Peller in commercials for Wendy's

*“Can you hear me now?”*: catchphrase used in Verizon Wireless ads

*“I've fallen and I can't get up”*: a popular catchphrase of early 1990s popular culture based upon a line from a television commercial

*googling, to google*: the process of using a search engine to uncover what you can about your new girlfriend or boyfriend, named after the Google (www.google.com) search engine

*customer-centric*: created from the process of taking any noun and tacking "centric" to the end of it. In this case, it means a business, product or service is focused or "centered" on the customer. "Our new product line was produced using a customer-centric process." Now there's a novel concept.

*Pharmacy*, as part of the health care system, also uses its share of buzz words and catch phrases.

In pharmacy we have a “white coat phenomenon,” which refers to someone who uses his/her position of authority (the white coat) to discourage dissent or to elevate personal and professional status.

We have also been known to combine catch phrases and buzz words for even more effect. Take for example, *Pharmaceutical Care is consumer-focused.*

It could be said that buzz words and catch phrases make the English language more dynamic, but they can also serve to obscure the important aspects of communication.
Take for example a recent professional meeting where the president of the chain association observed that pharmacy was at a crossroads. This is a catch phrase that has been used repeatedly in pharmacy for at least the past thirty years.

- It was used to refer to the transition from the BS in pharmacy to the Doctor of Pharmacy degree.
- We used it again when we were arguing about the role of technicians and technology in community pharmacy.
- More recently, and in the context of the speaker, it was being used to support the argument that pharmacy must begin the transition from reimbursement based upon a product (the prescription) to reimbursement based upon patient care.

It is notable that the speaker was representing the chain drug store industry and that in the past that industry had strongly opposed a change in the reimbursement system.

In plain English, what this and other speakers are calling for is a change in the philosophy of pharmacy. To survive in the evolving health care environment, we must remain relevant to the needs of the patient. The patient’s need for someone to counsel them about increasingly complicated medications remains largely unmet. It is the pharmacist’s responsibility to meet this need and to utilize the latest in technology to reduce risks to a more acceptable level and to work with the prescriber and other health care providers to insure that the provision of care is continuous, regardless of the patient’s condition or physical location.

Such changes will not be painless. They will take courage, leadership and tenacity.

It can be done. It must be done.

I was once working as a relief pharmacist in a small, rural community pharmacy. I had just arrived and was assuming responsibility for the pharmacy as the owner was preparing to leave.

A young couple presented a prescription for a birth control pill. As I handed the finished prescription to the pair, I mentioned that they had probably heard this many times before, but I briefly reminded them of the medications’ potential side effects and encouraged them to call if they experienced any problems or had any questions after they had returned home. The couple looked at each other with a brief but meaningful glance, and then the woman said quietly, “We read up on birth control pills when I first started taking them, but this is the first time a pharmacist has ever told us about the hazards of taking this prescription.”

After they left, the pharmacist came up to me from the back of the store where he had been observing the conversation and remarked that he wished that he could do that ... counsel patients, but that he didn’t feel confident in his ability to do it effectively. For him, a change in his approach to pharmacy would have been too painful, confusing or discouraging.

It falls to each of us, as pharmacists responsible for the health and welfare of our patients, to take the future of pharmacy away from the crossroads of buzz words and catch phrases and into a new practice reality in which the full potential of the profession of pharmacy is realized through complete and comprehensive patient care. We can talk in phrases like paradigm shift, patient-
focused care, and pharmaceutical care, but until it becomes a routine part of our commitment to the patient, it will remain a buzz word ... \textit{without meaning and substance}. 