4 Speaking at Meetings
Clifford Hawkins

Begin with an arresting sentence; close with a strong summary; in between speak simply, clearly and always to the point; and above all be brief.

William J. Mayo¹ (1861–1939)

Speaking at meetings is a quicker way of reporting work than writing articles. Unfortunately, as the number of medical meetings increases, the communications delivered become harder to understand. There are several reasons for this. Formerly the contents of papers often consisted of brief descriptions of clinical or pathological conditions, whereas today scientific papers may occupy an entire session. Greater care is then demanded from the speaker and sometimes more intelligence from his audience. Priority is given to research. Also, the trend towards specialisation — each speciality with its own jargon and terminology — creates problems in intercommunication. One sometimes wonders whether general meetings will not soon become impracticable. Nevertheless, none of these developments should prevent a communication being understood, provided that it is properly delivered. Sometimes in a meeting lasting many hours, one communication only may be conspicuous for its clarity and fine slides — its presentation so concise and easy that few appreciate the work that went into its construction.

The thought of talking in public is alarming even to the experienced. Giving a communication at a medical meeting is no exception. Indeed, there are other worries apart from having to face an audience. For example, the strict time limit which may be 10 or 15 minutes; into this the speaker has, or rather imagines he has, to pack the results of research over months or years. It is not surprising that some communications are incomprehensible. However, it is possible to make complex matters comprehensible to all the audience. Sometimes a speaker may give a paper, but no one, not even the erudite, understands him. You meet the speaker in the corridor and he will tell you clearly in 1 or 2 minutes what his work is about. The reason for his failure on the podium is that he has either not prepared his talk or piles up every fragment of evidence to

¹ Quoted by Helen Clapesattle (1941) The doctors Mayo. University of Minnesota Press
prove his case and merely succeeds in confusing. It is only possible to make three or four points and these must be clearly in mind.

**Differences Between Speaking and Writing**

Speaking is an art by itself. The temptation to use an article perhaps already in the press as text for a talk should be resisted. It is better to plan the communication anew. A speech should be looser in texture, and less detailed, than an article. A reader chooses his own pace, lingering over obscure passages or skipping quickly over pieces of less interest and importance — or he can put down a book and come back to it when he has learned more. The listener, by contrast, must accept the speed chosen by the speaker. An annoyed or antagonised listener will in spirit leave you and as far as your talk is concerned, he will never come back.

In listening, continuous attention is needed; there is no time to pause, to linger over difficult passages, or to study an illustration again. One unknown word which makes the listener stumble, and think, may cause loss of contact with the speaker. So the speaker must speak clearly and simply, indicating when he is moving on to the next point — for the listener does not have ideas separated by punctuation or paragraphs — and perhaps repeating key points. No one wants to hear a speaker "talking like a book".

**Planning a Communication**

Some speakers have a natural ability to make an interesting subject dull or a simple one complicated; others can imbue a complicated subject with an interest and clarity which captivates their audience. It is generally true that the clearer the delivery, the harder the work that has been put into its preparation (Fig. 4.1). The person who boasts that he has thought out his talk in the train on the way to the meeting may sometimes be brilliant; more often the listener will wish that the journey had been longer or not undertaken at all.

**Form and Style**

The simple pattern — beginning, middle and end — should be followed. A short introduction is not only desirable for clarity but also a natural courtesy to those unfamiliar with the subject; and there is seldom an