

Professor John Skelton BA, RSA Cert TEF(S)L, MA, MRCPGP

Professor of Clinical Communication

Primary Care Clinical Sciences

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About

John Skelton is Professor of Clinical Communication, and co-Director of the [Interactive Studies Unit \(ISU\)](/schools/haps/teaching/ISU/index.aspx) (</schools/haps/teaching/ISU/index.aspx>)

He is also Associate Director of Education (Quality) in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences, and has responsibility for the educational quality of all College Programmes.

Other responsibilities include Director of the College Professional Support Unit, and Head of Learning and Teaching for the School of Health and Population Sciences.

He is the author of *Language and Clinical Communication: this bright Babylon*, which draws on his background in Applied Linguistics, and puts forward an alternative to mainstream views of teaching and research into communication for the healthcare professions. He has published in excess of 100 academic papers on aspects of clinical communication, medical education, medical humanities, and applied linguistics, with research appearing in journals as diverse as *The Lancet* and *Applied Linguistics*.

In addition, John has a particular interest in international education, and has undertaken many short consultancies or courses around the world, mainly to evaluate language teaching programmes at overseas universities in eg Language for Medical Purposes, or to deliver direct teaching or teacher-training on language-related areas.

Qualifications

- Member of the Royal College of General Practice (2002)
- MA (Distinction) Linguistics and Language Teaching, Leeds 1981.
- Royal Society of Arts Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language, Hammersmith and West London College 1977.
- BA (Class I), English Language and Literature, Liverpool 1972.

Biography

John graduated in English from Liverpool University in 1972. His interest in language teaching, and particularly in the language of the workplace, began when he went to Spain as an English teacher, and amongst other things was asked to teach English for Electrical Engineers with no knowledge of the field, and no existing materials. He then spent some time teaching in London, before becoming Director of the British Council Teaching Centre in Muscat, Oman, in his mid-twenties. He had overall responsibility for a teaching programme with around 30 teachers and 1000 students, mostly civil servants attached to government ministries.

His first academic post was at the National University of Singapore, where he taught aspects of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, particularly the use of language in Education. He returned to UK to take up a post in the Language Studies Unit (LSU) at Aston University, where he was appointed Director a few months later. In particular, he expanded Aston's MSc Programme for teachers of the language of the workplace, opening centres at a number of overseas sites to deliver the programme to a wider audience, turning the programme into the largest in the field in UK. He then undertook a similar role at Surrey University, before moving into academic medicine in 1992, where he was originally appointed to lead on Birmingham's clinical communication teaching.

He therefore has direct responsibility, shared with Dr Connie Wiskin, for clinical communication teaching on a range of College Programmes.

John's role has expanded as the definition of "clinical communication" has itself expanded, so that he and the ISU team are now closely involved in delivering teaching in a wide range of areas, such as training the trainers, management, leadership and other areas of Professionalisation.

Apart from work with students registered at Birmingham John is closely involved, through the ISU, with offering courses for qualified health professionals, mostly doctors. In particular, the ISU has a contract with Health Education West Midlands to offer 1 to 1 support to 100 doctors – and some dentists – each year, in the Referred Doctors Programme. (Some doctors refer themselves, in addition – we welcome enquiries).

The ISU has a national and international reputation in the field of clinical communication

Teaching

Teaching Programmes

- [Medicine and Surgery MBChB](/undergraduate/courses/med/medicine.aspx) (</undergraduate/courses/med/medicine.aspx>)
- [Dental Surgery BDS](/undergraduate/courses/med/dental-surgery.aspx) (</undergraduate/courses/med/dental-surgery.aspx>)

And a wide variety of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses through the ISU

Postgraduate supervision

Within Academic Medicine, John has supervised students to successful PhDs in a wide variety of areas concerned with spoken and written clinical communication, and medical education.

He would be interested to hear from anyone who wants to develop research in any of these areas, or in an aspect of medical humanities.

Research

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Research into clinical communication, and course development and evaluation in the early years of the ISU was supported by a charitable grant from the Warburg Trust of £1million.

This enabled the ISU to demonstrate its value and become self-sustaining within a very short period of time. **Evaluation** research demonstrated the success of the methodologies developed, and John's research on the language of the doctor-patient consultation and the structure of written academic text within medicine gave indications of what should be taught. In particular, he has argued that the mainstream view of language within the health professions, that it consists of a set of behaviours which lead to predictable consequences, is mistaken, and seeks to assert that a more sophisticated understanding of the way in which natural languages work is essential if we are to understand the role of language in clinical communication.

John's research centres on the applications of corpus-based (ie, evidence-based) methodologies, particularly **concordancing**, to the study of the language of the health professions, especially medicine. Original concordancing research was published in a wide variety of journals, including *The Lancet* and *BMJ*.

John also uses **genre analysis**, and other forms of **discourse analysis**, to look eg at epistemological aspects of written academic text, and the relationship between what is said and how it is said.

Finally, John has published in the field of Medical Humanities, looking at the ways in which eg doctors and writers conceptualise "dying", at the relationship between patient narratives and literary narratives, and the like.

Other activities

Consultancies and short courses since 2008 include:

- Courses in Academic English and Evidence-based Medicine, Guangzhou and Beijing, China, 2011 -14
- Visiting Professor, Miyazaki Medical School, Japan 2006 and 2009 (Hosted by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science)
- Training the Trainer courses for Royal College of Defence Medicine, UK and Germany (various, 2005-14)

Previous consultations for British Council and ODA in Europe, South America, Middle East, Africa, South Asia and East Asia

Publications

Selected Publications 2008-14

Books

JR Skelton. *Language and clinical communication: this bright Babylon* Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press 2008.

JR Skelton. *Role-play and clinical communication: the rules of the game* Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press 2008.

Selected Papers

A de la Croix and JR Skelton. The simulation game: an analysis of interactions between students and simulated patients. *Medical Education* 2013;47:49-58.

JR Skelton, J Whetstone. English for Medical Purposes and academic medicine: looking for common ground. *Iberica* 2013;24:87-102.

JR Skelton. Clinical communication. In Dent J and Harden R. *A practical guide for medical teachers*. 4th edition. New York: Elsevier. 2013: 246-252.

JR Skelton. Narrative medicine: stories to some purpose. In Kirkcaldy, B ed. *The art and science of health care*. Dusseldorf; Hogrefe. 2011:313-328.

JR Skelton. Metaphors of dying in western literature. In Kellehear A, ed. *The study of dying*. 188-210. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009.

M O'Riordan, JR Skelton, A de la Croix. Heartlift patients? An interview-based study of GP Trainers and the impact of "patients they like". *Family Practice* 2008; 25:349-354.

