

WHAT'S UP DOC?

Steve Isaacs, STRI Turgrass Agronomist for Scotland, provides some help in the difficult task of explaining agronomic matters to golf club members

A little understanding

One of the major frustrations faced by turf managers worldwide is the lack of understanding from the end users of their efforts, i.e. the players out on the golf course. The fact that, in many instances, laymen have control of maintenance budgets increases this sense of frustration. Most greenkeepers in the UK would sell their soul for the autonomy over turf management given to superintendents in the USA. The few in this country who control their own budgets, either at professionally run clubs or where they are directly responsible to a proprietor, shudder at the prospect of going back to the days of being accountable to a committee of plumbers, lawyers and a myriad of other professions with little or no connection to the turf industry.

Right, now that I've got that out of my system, the reality is that the majority of greenkeepers working in this country have invariably to function in a management framework where decisions on turf maintenance issues are, at best, influenced by the thoughts of laymen. We have to accept this situation and make the most of it, in many instances it can work well given compromise and diplomacy. Unfortunately, not all greenkeepers have these skills in abundance. One of the basic tasks facing the turf manager is explaining his needs when it comes to resource provision and a works programme that will, from time to time, disrupt play. This is where some form of analogy can come in useful, using some area of experience that is common to everyone likely to sit on a committee which can be related to turf man-

agement. Unfortunately, most office-based occupations are wholly divorced from the turf experience. The office is a controlled environment, the antithesis of the golf course, sports pitch or bowling green. If the carpet in the office needs cleaning then you can vacuum whatever the weather! So, is there an area of common knowledge that can help bridge the communication gap?

The surgery is now open

Ever thought that your turf goes through the same life changes as your own body? Don't laugh. Most aspects of managing turf can be related to the workings of our own bodies, something that everyone has some experience of—though a few greenkeepers might question this of their committee men! I was once in discussion with a well respected member of the trade and he suggested that an agronomist is the equivalent of a doctor to the grass, the supplier taking the role of the pharmacist. I liked the idea and thought it could be expanded as a means of enlightening laymen to the basic principles behind turf management.

Let's try therefore and develop this train of thought with a few examples to show how using this analogy may help when attempting to get over a turf-related idea.

Nutrition

If you eat too much, you get fat. You become unhealthy; short of breath, susceptible to other diseases such as heart problems. If you starve yourself, you become weak and emaciated. Turf reacts in a very similar fashion. Over-fed turf becomes lush and sappy with soft tissues more prone to damage and disease. Under-fed turf is weak and anaemic.

When it comes to supplying adequate nutrition, a similar scenario can be seen. The human body will assimilate enough protein, vitamins and other nutritional needs from a bal-

anced diet. The same is true of turf. If turf is managed properly, there should be no need for supplements.

Irrigation

You will be relieved to hear that I haven't developed this idea far enough to find a turf management technique that equates to colonic irrigation, but watering is fairly straightforward.

Living tissue is predominantly made up of water. Humans need to keep drinking, particularly in hot weather, to avoid dehydrating. Turf suffers in a similar way, wilting is the grasses equivalent of collapsing in a heap; a thirst-driven heap that is, not an alcohol-induced one! The corollary is also true. If you drink too much, you will drown. Aeration is the life-belt thrown to waterlogged turf.

Aeration

A simple fact; if we don't breathe we die. So does grass. Fortunately for us, we live with the air all around us. Grasses' breathing apparatus, the roots, are underground so air in the soil is vital to its survival. Any traffic over the turf, from participants in the sport or maintenance equipment, squeezes air out of the soil. It is, therefore, necessary to open up the soil structure with aeration practices from time to time to help the grass breathe easier. If you like, aeration is the turf's ventilator!

Thatch

Thatch is the turf equivalent of cholesterol. Too much thatch clogs the turf's arteries, making it more prone to disease and damage.

I always remember a visit to a golf club whose greens had a thatch problem. The visit was carried out in the early spring and the meadow-grass dominated greens were looking their usual sickly yellow colour. I was asked why this was. The spongy thatch was obviously saturated so my response was to respectfully suggest to the committee member that his legs

might not look too clever if he sat all winter with his feet in a bucket of cold water. I don't think he tried out this experiment. Hey, I'm really getting into this. Step behind the screen and get undressed while I expand this analogy.

The holistic approach to turf management

"Holistic" medicine is a term we have got used to in recent years. It describes a form of practice whereby the whole body and mind is considered a single entity in the treatment of any specific disease or illness. Good greenkeeping takes a similar approach. Considering the benefit of individual maintenance practices in isolation can be misleading, and can even focus attention on a minor ailment while ignoring more serious, underlying problems. This is where a visit from your friendly agronomist can pay dividends, particularly if you go for one with a good bedside manner. An annual, or more frequent, visit should consider the turf environment and the management of it as a whole, certainly discussing the need to adjust specific practices but relating this to the balance necessary in the management programme to achieve the desired end result.

This holistic approach should do away with the feed and water merchants who ruin turf and, indeed, any zealot who preaches a single, inflexible way of managing all turfgrass situations.

"It's a virus"

There is a rather cynical train of thought that when you visit your doctor with an ailment but he can't find anything wrong, the "it's a virus" fall-back comes into play. The same situation happens, from time to time, with turf. Although diagnosis is important, provided the doctor prescribes a programme of treatment which brings about an improvement in the condition, we are generally happy with the "it's a virus" syndrome. Turf management is, in this respect, very similar to the management of our own body. Although we would like to believe it is a pure science, there is a lot we do not know and the greenkeeper's art is still very much an essential part of turf maintenance.

Long-term illness

There is a tendency to blame any deterioration in turf quality on something that has, or has not, been done over the days or weeks prior to the appearance of the condition. This is not always true and one only has

to refer to human health issues to understand this.

The physical symptoms of human diseases do not always appear at the outset of the condition. I suppose cancer is the classic where tissue damage and the growth of abnormal cells can go unnoticed for years before physical symptoms bring about a call to the doctor and a diagnosis. This can happen to turf where inferior growing conditions, e.g. thatch accumulation or compaction, may not cause a deterioration in the appearance of the turf until the condition has developed for a number of years. Even then it may take some extreme weather to trigger turf damage. So, it is important when making a diagnosis not to jump to hasty conclusions.

The turf doctor's role: house calls
Most of us will be familiar with the "well-man" and "well-woman" policy being followed by the NHS, whereby routine check-ups are made to monitor our health and prevent problems from developing. In many respects, the annual visit by an agronomist could be considered a "well-course" policy. It is insurance against major disasters and the monitoring of thatch and compaction during an annual visit is just like having your blood pressure or pulse taken at the doctors. It is also true, as any doctor will tell you, that more frequent check-ups will mean a greater degree of control over potential dangers to your, or your turf's, health.

Just as you would visit a doctor when illness strikes suddenly, an occasional

one-off emergency call may be necessary for unexpected problems with your turf. Fortunately for me though, STRI agronomists are not expected to work the same hours as junior doctors! Treat the agronomist as you would your family doctor, he is there to help. But don't forget that there are a few Quacks out there!

You may think this approach is just a bit of fun. However, I am sure we all accept that communication is a vital part of the greenkeeper's role these days and what value are you getting out of this facet of the job

if the technical detail you are imparting sounds like an alien tongue to your committee? In searching for a common language, terms of reference that we can all follow, we will gain a better understanding and, hopefully, be given the level of support we are looking for and which is, mostly, deserved.

So, next time you see a stranger walking the golf course, talking to the greens - it's either someone who's escaped from the nearest asylum or an agronomist undertaking a psychological assessment of the greens!

