It’s All In A Name

I am very old! I trained medically at the end of an era which had lasted at least 150 years. Eyes, hands and ears were paramount in making a diagnosis, we had little in the way of investigations or equipment and not very much in the way of treatment. All doctors could do in many cases was to describe what they saw and this resulted in a lexicon of wonderful descriptive terms. Many have been consigned to history. I thought in this piece I might look back over a few from bygone times.

I have in my possession a few old medical textbooks and a review found some lovely words which, alas, like their sufferers, are no longer with us.

**Ablepsy** is a lack or loss of sight. Others define it simply as blindness. It is believed to have been derived from the Latin word *oplepsia* meaning a failure to see or to notice something, which in turn comes from the Greek, ἀβλεψία.

Its first use as a medical term is believed to have been by the physician John Bullokar, who was born in Chichester in 1574. Not only did he practise medicine but was the author of “A True Description of the Passion of our Saviour Jesus Christ, a poem in six-line stanzas” in 1622, five years before he died in 1627.

**Ague** is a picturesque word dating back to the thirteenth century and used to describe a malarial fever associated with paroxysms of sweating, feeling hot and cold and with fits. It is believed to derive from the old French *ague*

meaning an acute fever, which in turn arises from “*febris acuta*”, the Latin word to describe the same condition. James Fenimore Cooper, the early nineteenth century American author and naval man, to whom we shall remain indebted as the writer of *The Last of the Mohicans*, wrote;

> “Fortunately for me, there were only two cases of fever and ague on the ship”.

**Apoplexy** has a clinical and a more social meaning. It is derived from the Greek word ἀποπληξία, meaning a ‘striking away’ and has passed through Latin and other European languages.

From a medical perspective, it is a state of unconsciousness resulting from a stroke.

However, it has also come to mean a state of intense and almost uncontrollable anger. It sounds colourful to say that someone might become “apoplectic with fury” but the medical disease behind it may be catastrophic.

Medicine for Managers articles are not intended to be a source of medical advice. Their purpose is to familiarise the non-medical reader about current key medical disorders. Any medical or medicinal products mentioned by name are examples only and should not be regarded as an endorsement of their use.
**Biliousness.** Literally, biliousness relates to, or containing bile and was a term used until relatively recently to indicate vomiting gastric fluid containing bile, normally the result of liver or gallbladder disease.

It was used in the 18th and 19th centuries to include indigestion, abdominal pain, flatulence and even constipation. It was regarded as a consequence of good living and was therefore not regarded as a stigma.

**Childbed Fever:** was a devastating disease. The infection occurred in the female genital tract with sepsis as a result of unhygienic birthing and contaminated medical equipment associated with delivery.

Many women died and, of those who did not, sterility was the inevitable consequence.

The infection would appear two to four days after the delivery with pain, fever, discharge and bleeding progressing to death or disability. Puerpural fever was a mystery aggravated by doctors and hospitals.

It was said “wherever went medical men, so more common grew the disease”. In 1791, following a veritable epidemic of puerperal fever in Scotland, Gordon, Aberdeen's leading obstetrician, reached three conclusions; it was caused by doctors and midwives, it was somehow related to skin infections and bleeding the patient was the best treatment.

Two out of three wasn’t bad! Now relatively rare thanks to those antibiotics.

**Chorea:** is a disorder of abnormal movements, one of a group of neurological disorders called dyskinesia. It is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘the dance’ because the vigorous movements of the feet or hands may appear like the movements of dancing. They may take the form of jerking, writhing or twisting movements which may be irregular or rhythmic. More recently, the principal forms of the condition have lost the name chorea and are now known as Huntington’s disease and Sydenham’s disease.

**Consumption:** The presence of the disease, if not its cause, has been known since the time of the Ancient Egyptians. The Greeks called it “phthisis” meaning “consumption” and Hippocrates believed it to be the most widespread disease of his age.

It was called consumption simply because it consumes the body of the individual sufferer, the weight dropping dramatically as the ravages of the disease progress.

Its present name, tuberculosis, was believed to have been first coined in about 1840 and forty years later, Koch discovered the tubercle bacillus and the name became widely used.

It is wrong to think of tuberculosis as a thing of the past. There are eight million new cases globally every year.

**Decrepitude:** This word sums me up some mornings. It is a state of being decrepid and was, as you can imagine, much more popular in the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries when doctors did not much care who they offended by their descriptions of health or lack of it.

However, though no longer used, there are still patients to whom the word would apply if it were to be used.

**Dementia Praecox:** This term, which has fallen into disuse, really signifies a premature dementia.

In the late 19th Century it was an alternate name for madness, especially in young patients. The term was introduced by Pick, professor of psychiatry in Prague, to

---

*Medicine for Managers articles are not intended to be a source of medical advice. Their purpose is to familiarise the non-medical reader about current key medical disorders. Any medical or medicinal products mentioned by name are examples only and should not be regarded as an endorsement of their use.*
distinguish features of what was to become schizophrenia and personality disorders from what was then called manic depressive insanity (now bipolar).

It has in fact been suggested that the term should be resurrected to replace the schizophrenia label with a broader term.

Drapetomania: Most older terms have been replaced by modern alternatives but this one was the fanciful concept introduced by American Physician Samuel Cartwright in the mid nineteenth century to describe a mental illness affecting black slaves which prompted them to flee captivity and slavery.

It was later used more broadly to describe the urge to run away from a place or a situation.

It was pseudoscience, an example of scientific racism and has been comprehensively debunked.

Dropsy: This is an old and somewhat colourful word used to describe the accumulation of fluid in the soft tissues.

It was used when the reason for ankle and lower leg swelling and fluid accumulation in other areas was not understood.

Dropsy is now more condition-specific and would, for example, be called congestive cardiac failure and the general condition is called œdema.

The term is believed to be derived from the Middle English term ‘dropesie’, from the French ‘hydropsie’, which in turn came from the Greek ‘hydrops’ derived from ‘hydro’ meaning water.

The French Pox (also known as ‘Bad Blood’) was the name given to syphilis following a severe outbreak of the disease in the French army. Columbus’ ships brought it from America to Italy and thence through Europe.

It was known as French pox everywhere in Europe apart from in France where it was called the English disease.

Having the pox condemned the sufferer to a reputation for debauchery and the treatment with mercury was highly toxic and in some ways as bad as the disease.

Gathering: This rather attractive term belies the rather unpleasant nature of its use, which describes a collection of pus.

Lumbago: Many people will recall that lumbago was still a popular term into the 1980s.

Lumbago actually remains a useful if unused term to describe non-specific pain in the muscles and joints of the lower back.

It is common in all ages and incorporates a variety of causes. Most people will experience pain or spasm in the lower back at some time in their lives. It may be caused by strains or tears in muscles, prolapse or slippage of a disc or arthritis or thinning (osteoporosis) of the bones.

Since it is often difficult to give a specific diagnosis, even with the aid of scans, lumbago is still, in my view, a useful term.

Marasmus: A rarely used term which used to be common to describe the severe and progressive malnutrition occurring in young children as a result of undernourishment.

The result is that the child looks emaciated, even to the point of appearing skeletal, and practically the disease is defined in measurement by a weight of less than 60% of what would be expected for a child of that age.

It is seen in children below the age of one. The term comes from the Greek word, μαρασμός (marasmus) meaning ‘withering’.
It is the result of deficiency of carbohydrate, lipids and protein.

**Scrubener’s Palsy:** This colourful term is probably better known as writer’s cramp. It is also called mogigraphia on other occasions.

It is, in fact, a reversible spasm of muscles in the fingers, hands and forearm, which occurs in people who write extensively and prefer the pen to the keyboard, play an instrument (musician’s cramp) or use the hand for other focal activities.

**Scrofula:** The term scrofula comes from the Latin word meaning a brood sow. It is a term which was applied to those patients suffering from tuberculosis affecting the lymphatic glands in the neck.

The enlargement of the glands presumably led to the association with the head of the sow. Most tuberculosis affects the lungs but the lymph node enlargement represents extra-pulmonary (outside the lungs) TB.

In medieval times the touch of the King was believed to be curative. Surgery was adopted as treatment until the development of anti-tuberculous chemotherapy which has now become the standard treatment.

**Softening of the Brain:** Another term that has given way to a more explicit current medical term, encephalomalacia.

It is now used as a non-specific term for a change in consistency of brain tissue, usually secondary to a bleed or an infarct (due to blockage of the blood supply) to the brain.

It can also be due to cancer, parasites, an abscess, etc. To most people, though it is taken to mean the loss of higher centres thought, such as might occur in dementia.

Confusion and loss of memory may be associated with more specific deficiencies and symptoms such as excessive sleepiness, blindness, loss of balance and disturbance in consciousness.

It was commonly used as a derogatory term to explain the problem in someone considered not to be very bright.

**The Vapours:** It is hard to see this term and not think of Miss Marple or Downton Abbey. Genteel women might suffer a fit of the vapours; a sudden feeling of faintness or nervousness or being in a depressed state.

It did not generally relate to a specific condition but to being suddenly overwhelmed by apparent events.

Some of the episodes were attributed to the custom of women to wear corsets which were too tightly tied thereby compressing the chest and the abdomen. The term faded away in the early part of the twentieth century.

Medicine has a wonderful vocabulary, derived from so many sources. Many words are Latin and Greek which enabled physicians and surgeons through the ages to communicate using common terminology.

Other conditions were derived from its religious roots. St Vitus (and his dance), St Anthony (and his fire) and other religious figures contributed to the lexicon.

Many other diseases and items of equipment are named eponymously. Most people have heard of Addison’s disease, Bright’s disease, Paget’s disease and so many more, the ultimate tribute of a profession to its pioneers.

Other conditions were named according to the calamitous nature of their consequences. The Black Death, Corruption, Falling sickness, Jail Fever (typhus), Lockjaw and Ship Fever all

---

*Medicine for Managers* articles are not intended to be a source of medical advice. Their purpose is to familiarise the non-medical reader about current key medical disorders. Any medical or medicinal products mentioned by name are examples only and should not be regarded as an endorsement of their use.
graphically describe the outcome of conditions without any sparing of feelings or sentiment.

Perhaps the most important contribution to the language derived from the period when doctors eagerly examined and explored the body and its constituents without being able to offer much in the way of treatment.

The language of description in early texts is magnificent. I first encountered the words crenelated (which means finely notched) and tessellated (having a geometric or mosaic pattern) in descriptions of cells or tissues and they provide a quality and romance to medical literature which is rarely superseded.

The quality of medicine in Britain over the last eight hundred years (and I include in that the great discoveries in nursing, in physical therapies, in science and technology and in pharmaceuticals) are one of the facets that make Great Britain great.

As a country managing all aspects of health our forebears consistently punched above their weight.

And of course, in the NHS, we have the finest health system in the world.

I have been privileged to be a doctor in Britain for the last forty odd years.

Let us hope that, in 100 years, we still lead the world in developments, in skills, in progress and in humanity.

paullambden@compuserve.com