

The Amazing Language of Medicine: Understanding Medical Terms and Their Backstories

Robert B. Taylor, MD
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Medical doctors are primarily thought of as healers, even though many may prefer to perceive of themselves as scientists, administrators, teachers, or humanitarians. For centuries, doctors have earned well justified reputations as being both learned and skilled in diverse fields of knowledge.

Dr. Robert B. Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Family Medicine at the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, has published 30 books on various aspects of medical practice. His most recent, *The Amazing Language of Medicine: Understanding Medical Terms and Their Backstories*, is an etymological, philological, and historical work that entertainingly elucidates esoteric origins of selected medical vocabulary without the constraints, bulk, or boredom of traditional medical dictionaries. Like Isidore of Seville, the medieval scholar who penned the encyclopedic volume *Etymologiae or Origines*, Taylor has ranged far and wide and tapped varied sources in the course of compiling this instructive work illuminating the provenance of medical terminology.

Richly illustrated on almost every page, this work is meant to broaden the perspective of practicing physicians, many of whom will not have had the inclination or opportunity to consider the lexical background of the terms they use daily. Derivations are described based on mythological associations (Mercury—a god before becoming a metal); imaginative comparisons based on appearances (Coccyx—from the Greek for a Cuckoo bird's bill, which it resembles); and functions (bulimia—from the Greek for urgently eating like an ox). He describes words and terms that are borrowed from other languages (Hashish—from the Arabic for powdered hay or hemp); specific geographic locations (Clap—from a medieval red-light district in Paris); and onomatopoeia (Quack—by analogy to the duck-like sounds of a medical huckster).

Another category consists of eponymous terms named either after physicians who discovered diseases (Addison's, Hansen's, and various Paget's diseases); anatomic features (Baker's cysts, Henle's loops, Cooper's ligament); diagnostic tests (Wasserman, Roentgen, Papanicolaou); and diagnostic physical signs (McBurney's, Blumberg's, Dunphy).

Eponymy is not confined to physician's names, patients (Lou Gehrig, Stephen Christmas, Helen Lane) have diseases and cell types named for them, as do fantasy characters (Peter Pan, Popeye, Baron Munchausen). The

named for Charles K. Tashima who in 1965 described "a condition in which a physician searches for a new sign, disease or symptom to which his name can be attached."

Taylor defines a "nonce word" as a neologism, which he also terms an "authorism," a word specially devised for a singular textual situation, but which does not catch on, and hence, has no afterlife. This he distinguishes from those neologisms that are both attributable to a specific author, and having been adopted by others, go on to persist as standard words or expressions. He cites the 17th century English physician Sir Thomas Brown as the originator of such words as "suicide, ambidextrous and locomotion;" Carl Jung rather than Sigmund Freud as the initiator of the notion of a psychological problem as a "complex;" and Percy Bysshe Shelly as the first to use the terms "heartless," "optimistic," and "national anthem." More modern neologisms, ranging from "fascinoma" (unasccribed as to authorship) and "iPatient" which first appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2008 in an article by Abraham Verghese (AΩA, James H. Quillen College of Medicine, 1989, Faculty), are also noted.

Many busy and highly focused physicians could do with a bit of distraction, and relaxation, from their daily studies and routines, and Taylor's *Amazing Language of Medicine*, might be just the right medicine to refresh and rejuvenate one's workaday practice while expanding one's understanding of medical history in a significant way.

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