

MEDICAL TERMS AND THEIR HIDDEN STORIES

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Abstract: This article deals with six nicely sounding medical terms, behind which serious diseases are hidden. These medical terms are in fact eponyms, or toponyms. To a subgroup of eponyms belong mythonyms, by some authors called also anthroponyms. This form of formation of new medical terms is neither a new one, nor a rare one. In some branches of medicine eponyms are so widely used that there exist even eponymic dictionaries. As eponyms do not tell us about motivation of the term, it is difficult to remember them. They get replaced by other terms that describe exactly the concept of the term. At the end of the paper there are described some advantages and disadvantages of eponyms.

Key words: word-formation, medical terms, anthroponyms, mythonyms, eponyms, toponyms

Introduction

Medical terminology is very wide and varied. Besides terms formed in regular ways of word-formation (derivation, compounding, abbreviation) there are many terms, such as Christmas disease, parkinsonism, Alzheimer disease, Achilles tendon, narcissism, Oedipus complex, Diogenes syndrome, Alice in Wonderland syndrome, Bornholm disease, Ebola fever, etc. that do not refer to any sign or symptom of the named disease. There are sometimes nice stories hidden in these anthroponyms, mythonyms or toponyms. Knowing some stories of the terms makes the teaching of medical terminology more interesting and fun.

1. Eponyms

If you fall ill during Christmas, it does not mean that you immediately get Christmas disease or that you are a member of a royal family. Christmas disease or Haemophilia B is a severe bleeding disease of males with a sex-linked recessive inheritance (Biggs, 1952: 1378-1382). It is an ancient disease only brought under control in the last 50 years. The first reference to this disease comes from the 2nd century A.D. Some Jewish texts refer to boys who bled to death after circumcision. In the 11th century the Arab physician Albucasis (1013-1106) described males in one family dying after minor injuries (Kugler 2008). In more recent history Queen Victoria's son prince Leopold suffered from haemophilia, and two of her daughters,

Alice and Beatrice, were carriers of the gene. Through them, haemophilia was passed to the royal families in Spain and Russia. The most famous young man with haemophilia was Alexei – the only son of the last Tsar Nicolas II.

Until 1952 it was believed that all bleeding disorders are caused by one and the same disease. In 1952 seven English doctors described seven different cases of haemophilia and realized there were two types of haemophilia – A and B. Haemophilia B so-called Christmas disease was named after a 5-year-old boy named Stephen Christmas, who had numerous episodes of haemorrhage, mostly resulting from injuries during play. He was transfused on numerous occasions and after transfusion the bleeding ceased. Stephen Christmas' surname became an eponymic medical term. "The naming of clinical disorders after patients was introduced by Sir Jonathan Hutchinson and is now familiar from serological research; it has the advantage that no hypothetical implication is attached to such a name" (Biggs, 1952: 1378-1382).

Some authors call this type of word formation 'anthroponyms' from the Greek word *ánthropos* meaning 'man' (Karenberg 2005).

1.1 Mythonyms

To older layer of eponyms belong terms motivated by Greek mythology. These terms are also called mythonyms (Karenberg 2005). Greek myths were a rich source for creation of new medical terms. Ancient physicians familiar with Greek mythology took inspiration from it in naming new things. Nowadays the situation is completely different. Education in classical languages is declining and there is a fear that the motivation of terms by mythological heroes will be lost along with the semantic meaning of such mythonyms. Hopefully mythonyms will not be replaced. Well known mythonyms are *Achilles tendon*, *narcissism*, *Oedipus complex*.

In the Greek history one can also find myths based on real persons. One of them that penetrated even to medical terminology is a myth about the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who lived in 4th century B.C. His name became an eponym for a syndrome – *Diogenes syndrome* – sometimes observed in elder people. Why Diogenes Syndrome? Who was Diogenes of Sinope? And why he became so famous? Diogenes was a very controversial figure of Greek history. He was very critical of others, and was not shy in expressing his opinions. With his lifestyle and behaviour he used to criticise the social values and institutions of the

corrupt society, he lived in. His most famous encounter was when he first met Alexander the Great. Alexander said upon seeing him slouched up against his barrel, "Diogenes, I have heard much about you and your great wisdom. Is there anything I could do for you?" after which Diogenes replied, "Yes. You could step aside a little, so as not to keep the sunshine from me." Alexander the Great reportedly said to an attendant as he continued walking, "If I were not Alexander, I should like to be Diogenes." (<http://diogenes.weebly.com/his-philosophy-and-anecdotes.html>)

Diogenes syndrome is a behavioural condition characterized by severe hygiene neglect. People with this syndrome also have a problem with excessive hoarding. They keep everything from collectibles to garbage to rotting food. Usually such people isolate themselves, live in unsanitary conditions voluntarily, have a distorted reality, and suffer from unpredictable mood swings. Other names for Diogenes Syndrome include *Senile Breakdown*, *Social Breakdown*, *Senile Squalor Syndrome*, and *Messy House Syndrome* (Rios, Internet source)

This syndrome was described also by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations* and Nicolas Wasiljewich Gogol in *Dead Souls* and takes names after their main characters Havisham's syndrome or Plyushkin's syndrome (Misiaszek, Internet source).

1.2 Literary figures

Among eponyms several literary figures can be found that have become names of diseases or syndromes. In the well-known children's story by Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice experiences many strange and wonderful things. Her perception is distorted, and she feels herself growing larger and larger, or smaller and smaller. *Alice in Wonderland syndrome* (AIWS), also known as micropsia, is an unusual, temporary neurological condition that alters the patient's sense of time, space, size, and body image. The inspiration for the imagery in the story may have come from hallucinations associated with the migraine aura sufferers may experience before the actual onset of the migraine. The syndrome appears to be most common in children five to 10 years old. The senses of hearing and touch may also be affected. The syndrome tends to occur during darkness, and continues even when the eyes are closed (Davidson, Internet source).

1.3 Toponyms

From a 'fairy-tale' disease we will travel into reality. The following two diseases are connected with travelling. *Bornholm disease* (also called *epidemic pleurodynia* or *epidemic myalgia*) is an endemic disease that was first reported in 1950. It is a viral infection, causing pain in the chest or abdomen, with flu-like symptoms. The infection can spread easily from one person to another and tends to occur as an outbreak in a community, or even as an epidemic affecting a large number of people in one area. It is named after the Danish island, Bornholm, where early cases occurred (Hopkins, 1950: 1230-1232.). Another term motivated by a place name is *Ebola*. It is a severe, often fatal disease characterised with haemorrhagic fever. The disease is caused by infection with the Ebola virus, named after a river in the Republic of the Congo in Africa, where it was first recognized. The disease may be caused by any of four of the five known ebola viruses and is known as *Ebola virus disease* (EVD) or *Ebola haemorrhagic fever* (EHF). Terms which use geographic names in naming some disease, disorder, syndrome, etc. are called toponyms.

Conclusion

Mythonyms, toponyms and other terms with '-onym' ending are said to belong to the subcategory of eponyms, but with far less frequent occurrence than eponyms.

Eponyms are not a completely new phenomenon in medicine. They have a long tradition in Western medicine. They were known already in Galenos' era (app. 125 – 199 BC) (Kronika medicíny, 1994: 629). The wider use of eponyms, however, started in the first half of the 19th century, when in honour of the physician-discoverer a discovered part of the human body, disease, symptom, syndrome, factor, anomaly etc. were first named. Being awarded an eponym is regarded as an honour. At a time when medicine lacked the tools to investigate the underlying causes of many syndromes, the eponym was a convenient mechanism for attaching a label to a disease. Relatively few diseases have been named after patients who suffered some rare diseases, e.g. *Hartnup disease*, *Lou Gehring's disease*, *Mortimer's disease*, etc. Hundreds and hundreds of diseases, syndromes or anomalies have been named after the persons who first described them. This usually involves publishing an article in a respected medical journal. Such was the case of a progressive degenerative disorder of the central nervous system – *Parkinsonism* – named after the English doctor, James Parkinson, or of a

special form of dementia studied and first described by the German neuropathologist, Alois Alzheimer, the two very serious diseases afflicting mainly the older generation nowadays. Medicine has been enthusiastic in naming tests, symptoms, and diseases after their discoverers. Some sources state there are about 8.000 eponyms (<http://www.whonamedit.com>); others estimate their number to be up to 30.000. (Bujalková, 2011: 20). In some branches of medicine, there are even eponymic dictionaries.

Some eponyms occur only in one variety of English as it is in case of *Lou Gehring's disease*. Louis Gehring was a famous American baseball player who suffered *amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS)*, also referred to as *Lou Gehrig's disease* in American English and *motor neurone disease* in British English.

Some names of diseases were motivated by name of one person, e.g. Bartholin's gland, Golgi apparatus, von Willebrand disease/syndrome, Werlhof's disease, Cooley's anaemia, others by two or three persons, e.g. Howell – Jolly bodies, Chediak – Steinbrinck – Higashi syndrome, which is one of the major disadvantages of eponyms.

It is not always easy to explain the origin of the eponyms because they do not reflect any essential characteristic of the term. They do not inform us about the content of the term. As you might have noticed many of the mentioned eponyms have also other names – the more descriptive and accurate ones. Many doctors and experts prefer descriptive terms to eponyms in processing the *International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems*. Some eponyms are too well-known and it is impossible to find simple designation for them, e.g. Parkinson or Alzheimer diseases.

An advantage of eponyms is that they express a complex and very complicated concept in one word. A disadvantage is that they have no meaning, which is why it is more difficult to remember them than descriptive multi-word terms. Only experts are familiar with eponyms; they have no exact scientific accuracy. Usage of eponyms varies in different countries. Some scientists argue that eponyms are no longer appropriate (Woywodt and Matteson, 2007: 424), others (Whitworth, 2007: 425) believe they remain a useful reflection of medical history:

Eponyms bring colour to medicine, they provide a convenient short hand for the profession and the community alike, and they embed medical traditions and culture in our history. The use of eponyms in medicine, as in other areas, is often random, inconsistent, idiosyncratic, confused, and heavily influenced by local geography and culture. This is part of their beauty. For example,

Plummer-Vinson syndrome in the United States (and Australia), *Paterson-Kelly's syndrome* in the United Kingdom, and *Waldenstrom-Kjellberg syndrome* in Scandinavia all describe *sideropenic dysphagia*. There are even differences within countries. For example, *cholecystography* was known as such in Melbourne but called the *Graham test* in Sydney.

The hidden stories in their names can be very useful in teaching medical terminology in medical students.

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