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23 June 2015 19:53

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Patient privacy and Latin: my father's story

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TO THE EDITOR: Like Haley's father,¹ I too lament the fact that Latin terms have fallen out of use in medical terminology. I also think it retrograde that Latin is being taught to fewer and fewer of our secondary students, as they are missing out on an opportunity to learn so much more about our own language, let alone terms that they might use later in their clinical practice.

However, I do not think that it was Latin that helped the young teacher out of a difficult predicament in the 1950s. I can assure Haley that "pseudocyesis" is all Greek to me.

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1 Haley KA. Patient privacy and Latin: my father's story [letter]. Med J Aust 2007; 186: 328.

James Mitchell

TO THE EDITOR: Thank you for the charming letter about "non-pseudocyesis" published in the 19 March issue.¹ It reminded me of the Brander Matthews quote: "A gentleman need not know Latin, but at least he should have forgotten it." This is particularly apt, as the term "pseudocyesis" is from Greek.

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1 Haley KA. Patient privacy and Latin: my father's story [letter]. Med J Aust 2007; 186: 328.

William EM Renton-Power

TO THE EDITOR: The tale told by Katherine Haley's father about his clever advice on how to protect the privacy of a young pregnant woman makes a good story.¹ However, while "non" is a Latin word, "pseudocyesis" is very good Ancient Greek (ψευδοκνησις). Queen Mary I ("Bloody Mary"), who was believed for many months to be with child but ultimately returned to court childless, may have suffered from pseudocyesis.

I agree with Dr Haley's opinion about the lamentable decline in the use of both Latin and Greek terms in medical practice. I take the time to teach my students, residents and registrars enough Latin and Greek to render classical plurals correctly (eg, fistulae, diverticula, carcinomata). Whether they take any notice of this classical teaching is another matter.

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1 Haley KA. Patient privacy and Latin: my father's story [letter], Med J Aust 2007; 186: 328.

Roger KA Allen

TO THE EDITOR: I was both delighted and a little perturbed to read the recent letter by Katherine Haley about her general practitioner father who outsmarted the Department of Education by a medical sleight of hand, stating that his patient had "nonpseudocyesis".¹ However, it was not Latin, but Greek, that did the trick. Despite Dr Haley's background in Latin, he, like all physicians, had unwittingly used Greek during his medical course.

I was fortunate to do a year of Ancient Greek during my undergraduate medical course and, like my late GP father, also did Latin for matriculation. It is unfortunate that Greek is no longer taught in Queensland schools, and Latin only in a few. I believe that we are the poorer for this, and it shows in all sorts of ways, including a

general decline in literacy even at the tertiary level. A classical grounding demands scholarship and precision. I have found that knowledge of both Greek and Latin has enriched my knowledge of English literature and Western philosophy, as well as French. Such a grounding also trains the mind in analytical and ordered thought and provides greater insight into the workings of syntax and grammar and a greater facility with words - the building blocks of our language, many of which are derived from Greek and Latin.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I will remind readers that anatomical words in medicine are predominately Latin or Greek and that the names of nearly all symptoms and diseases are Greek (with some exceptions, such as "angina pectoris"). In Dr Haley's time, it was common for potential doctors to receive an arguably more "polished" education that embraced one or two languages, including Latin and, in some private schools, Greek. Alas, the current system of medical student selection favours those "idiots savants" who excel in mathematics and science and not the arts. With respect, I would like to point out that in the term "non-pseudocyesis", the only Latin component is "non", the rest being Greek (ψευδής, false; κνησις, pregnancy).

For both the enthusiast and the non-classicist, may I recommend my father's 5th edition of Gould's medical dictionary (1943), which contains the etymology of every medical word.

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1 Haley KA. Patient privacy and Latin: my father's story [letter]. Med J Aust 2007; 186: 328.

MeSH: Patient Rights, Privacy, Language (major), Terminology as Topic (major)

Publication title: Medical Journal of Australia

Volume: 187

Issue: 6

Pages: 375

Number of pages: 1

Publication year: 2007

Publication date: Sep 17, 2007

Year: 2007

Section: LETTERS

Publisher: Australasian Medical Publishing Company Proprietary, Ltd.

Place of publication: Pymont

Country of publication: Australia

Publication subject: Medical Sciences

ISSN: 0025729X

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: Comment

Accession number: 17918313, 17874996, 17918315

ProQuest document ID: 235725204

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/235725204?accountid=26503>

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Last updated: 2014-03-30

Database: ProQuest Central

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