



# Physician's Lexicon

## A Purgatory of Ambiguous Words

Each of the noble professions has its own vocabulary; and medical dictionaries attest to medicine's awesome gathering of 25,000 or so technical words. Certainly there are overlapping terms [between surgery and carpentry, for example] but words in the medical domain are singular to medicine with but rare clusters of words shared with still other vocations. Some of the words pertaining to gastrointestinal medications [purgative, cathartic], for example, are also employed by theologians to signify the acts of cleansing, penitence and expiation.

Purge, in the sense of cleaning, appears as a Latin verb meaning to cleanse, to purify. In a document dated 1185, St. Bernard was apparently the first to employ the Latin derivative noun, *purgatorium*, originally meaning a specific place for physical cleansing, now to mean a station where dead souls, who had died penitent, are gathered; and are

then purified of venal sins or undergo punishment for forgiven mortal sin prior to their passage to heaven. In ecclesiastic writing, Purgatory was then assumed to be a place of great purpose and geographic specificity. The word, purgative, however, remains essentially medical, describing those chemical agents which hasten the "cleansing" of the colon. The word, expurgate, now also yields a narrower meaning: to amend something by erasing its offensive elements. The Latin verb, *purgare*, to cleanse, is closely related to the verb *putare*, meaning to purify.

Purge, as an ideologically motivated social action, defines an act of cleansing, but with sharp and often, in certain European nations, mortal undertones.

A cathartic, medically speaking, describes a chemical agent designed to enhance bowel activity. The word derives from the Greek, *catharos*, meaning cleansing, purify-

ing; and perhaps from an earlier word meaning tree-pruning. Psychiatrists often employ the word, catharsis, to denote a purification [or clarification] of human emotions. The Catharists [the pure ones] were a heretical Christian sect of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries centered in the Languedoc region of French Provence; the sect was destroyed in the Albigensian Crusade.

A laxative, meaning a purgative or cathartic, is the most common word to describe a bowel-cleansing agent. It stems from the Latin, *laxus*, meaning to loosen, to widen or to open [cf. words such as relaxation]. Commercially offered laxatives have been given names as explicit as Ex-Lax; and as ambiguous as Serutan [the word, Nature's, spelled backwards.]

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## VITAL STATISTICS

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### Rhode Island Monthly Vital Statistics Report Provisional Occurrence Data from the Division of Vital Records

Underlying Cause of Death	Reporting Period			
	December 2007	12 Months Ending with December 2007		
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)	YPLL (c)
Diseases of the Heart	261	2,719	254.2	3,654.5
Malignant Neoplasms	188	2,280	213.1	5,972.5
Cerebrovascular Diseases	37	385	36.0	642.0
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicide)	37	516	48.2	8,078.5
COPD	47	424	39.6	322.5

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	June 2008	12 Months Ending with June 2008	
	Number	Number	Rates
Live Births	1,082	12,736	11.9*
Deaths	760	9,992	9.4*
Infant Deaths	(4)	(78)	6.1#
Neonatal Deaths	(4)	(58)	4.6#
Marriages	437	6,372	6.0*
Divorces	179	2,863	2.7*
Induced Terminations	357	5,047	396.3#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	37	816	64.1#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(37)	(746)	58.6#
20+ weeks gestation	(0)	(70)	5.5#

(a) Cause of death statistics were derived from the underlying cause of death reported by physicians on death certificates.

(b) Rates per 100,000 estimated population of 1,067,610

(c) Years of Potential Life Lost (YPLL)

*Note: Totals represent vital events which occurred in Rhode Island for the reporting periods listed above. Monthly provisional totals should be analyzed with caution because the numbers may be small and subject to seasonal variation.*

\* Rates per 1,000 estimated population

# Rates per 1,000 live births