The English language is said to embrace a bit over one million words; but since an average citizen can get along readily in urban life with an active knowledge of but 20,000 words, what are the purposes and reasons for survival of the remaining 980,000 terms - beyond burdening the pages of hernia-producing dictionaries?

Lexicographers claim that each learned profession adds its own contrived vocabulary to the general pool of words; in the case of medicine this amounts to an arcane collection of about 85,000 technical words. We are often asked by the lay public: Are all of these polysyllabic words really necessary? With all of your professional commitments to economy and brevity of expression, why do you not have a Committee on Retiring Medical Lexicography; its purpose to prune and discard your older terms which have been replaced by newer and more accurate words? To be precise, the Committee should ruthlessly discard those idle, antiquarian medical words for which even historians can find no use.

In truth, medical dictionaries are suffused with words that only a lexicographer might understand or cherish. Many [particularly psychiatric terms] have long since been supplanted by newer, more accurate terms. Consider, for example, an arbitrarily gathered battery of ancient words culled from a standard medical dictionary:

Innidiation: an archaic term for neoplastic metastasis.
Allotriogeustia: an ancient term for abnormal taste preferences; this word is linked to allotriophagy, the eating of bizarre foods [such as the earth-eaters of South Carolina].
Athymia: An old psychiatric diagnosis of an individual displaying an absence of affect; one showing extreme indifference [the word is unrelated to the thymus gland].

These words, if not dead, are certainly moribund. I doubt that any member of the Rhode Island Medical Society, no matter how erudite, could give accurate meaning to these verbal dinosaurs without retreating to ancient reference books.

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