



Physician's Lexicon

Medical Words in Extremis

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you not have a Committee on Retiring Medical Lexicography, its purpose to prune and discard your older terms which have been replaced by newer and more accurate words?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.

Allotriogeusia: 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].

Thymergasia: An abnormal psychiatric state, usually mania.

Paralyssa: an acute form of rabies associated with bat-bites. Lyssa, incidentally, is the Greek goddess of rabies, mad dogs and human rage.

Nosophilia: A morbid urge to be ill.

Amaxophobia: A pathologic fear of riding in automobiles.

Anerythroblepsia: Obsolete term for **anerythroptosis** which, in turn, is an ancient term for **protanopia** which defines blindness to the color red.

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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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			
	January 2008	12 Months Ending with January 2008		
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)	YPLL (c)
Diseases of the Heart	225	2,679	250.4	3,407.0
Malignant Neoplasms	188	2,277	212.9	5,960.0
Cerebrovascular Diseases	33	384	35.9	592.5
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicide)	46	523	48.9	8,365.5
COPD	61	444	41.5	342.5

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	July 2008	12 Months Ending with July 2008	
	Number	Number	Rates
Live Births	1,121	12,775	12.0*
Deaths	737	9,929	9.3*
Infant Deaths	(4)	(77)	6.0#
Neonatal Deaths	(4)	(58)	4.5#
Marriages	710	6,109	5.7*
Divorces	223	2,839	2.7*
Induced Terminations	350	4,897	383.4#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	68	829	64.9#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(62)	(757)	59.3#
20+ weeks gestation	(6)	(72)	5.6#

(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