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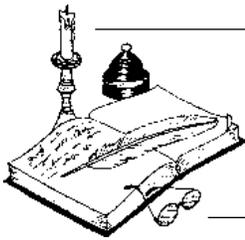
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Disclosure of Financial Interests

The authors have no financial interests to disclose.

9SOW-RI-GERIATRICS-092009

THE ANALYSES UPON WHICH THIS PUBLICATION IS BASED were performed under Contract Number 500-02-RI02, funded by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and completeness of the ideas presented.



Physician's Lexicon

Epochs, Eras and Eons

Each of the formal scientific disciplines, including medicine, possesses its own vocabulary. Some terminologies are shared as when medicine and the law overlap in the forensic sciences. Perhaps the least likely of the physical sciences to share scientific nomenclature with medicine is geology; yet even here there is some common ground in paleopathology and the Darwinian timelines.

Geologists whose timelines are more profoundly rooted than physicians' think in terms of millions – if not billions – of years. Thus they divide the 4.35 billion years of this globe's existence into eons, eras, periods and epochs. And the names that they have chosen for the Periods generally reflect geographic place-names rather than personages of classical mythology. Thus, for example, the Cambrian Period is named after the Latin name for Wales [*Cambria*]; the Ordovician Period is named after a Celtic tribe of ancient Wales

named the Ordovices; the Silurian Period is named after the Silures, the Brithonic people of ancient Wales; the Permian Period is named after the east Russian province of Perm; the Devonian Period is named after Devon, an English county; the Cretaceous Period is named after a Latin word, *creta*, meaning chalk; and the Jurassic Period is named after the Jura mountains in France and Switzerland.

There are a number of Greco-Roman prefixes appended to the geologic epochs that also crop up in medical nomenclature. These include the many prefixes attached to the Greek root *-cene*, meaning recent. These include: *paleo-* [Greek, meaning ancient], *proto-* [Greek, meaning first], *pleio-* [Greek, meaning more than or greater], *eo-* [Greek, meaning dawn], *oligo-* [Greek, meaning few or small], *pleisto-* [Greek, meaning the most of that which is new], and *holo-* [Greek, meaning entire or complete as in the Holocene Epoch and repre-

senting the geologic interval from 11,700 years ago to the present.] Medical terms employing these prefixes include paleocephalon, pleiotropy, pleochromocytoma, pleocytosis, oligodendroglioma, holocrania and holozoic.

The eons are given the following names: Hadean [about 4 billion years ago] representing the early formation of the solar system, named after the Greek word, Hades, the lower, or invisible, world. The Archaean [about 3 billion years ago], named for the Greek word meaning ancient or primitive; Proterozoic [about 2.8 billion years ago] from the Greek, meaning former or anterior, while the *-zoic* root is Greek, meaning living; and the Phanerozoic Eon [about 542 million years ago to the present] is from the Greek, meaning visible or manifest.

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD