

Physician's Lexicon

Synonyms of Nothing

Poets, philosophers—even physicists—have vainly sought to define the character and dimensions of nothingness. And physicians, too busy to explore the epistemology of nothingness, have been satisfied merely to gather their own assemblage of words defining pathologic nothingnesses, spaces, when encountered within the human body.

Thus, we confront the word, lacuna, a diminutive of the Latin, *lacus*, meaning a pond or a hollow, as in English words such as lake and lagoon. Small spaces, *lacunae*, are commonly encountered in arterially-compromised brain tissue and are then described in phrases such as lacunar encephalopathy. A very small lacuna is called a lacunule (representing a Latin diminutive of a diminutive.) The word, lacuna, however, is not related to the Greek name, Laocoon, the Trojan prophet who had predicted the perils lurking within the Horse built by the Greeks besieging Troy. It was he who said: "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

A vacuole, an empty space, generally of pathologic origin, is a diminutive of the Latin, *vacuum*, and is the source of such English words as vacuous, vacuity, vacant and vacuum.

The word, void, also meaning an emptiness, is descended through late (vulgar) Latin and is derived ultimately from *vacare*, meaning to be empty, as in English words such as vacation and evacuation. Cognate English words of void include devoid and avoid.

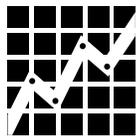
The adjective, spongiform, is a Greek term describing abnormal tissue filled with small cavities and thus resembling the marine invertebrates (*Porifera*), the sponges. A spongioblastoma is an archaic term for an aggressive astrocytoma.

The word cavity descends from the Latin, *cavus*, meaning a hollow, and gives rise to cognate words such as concavity and cavitation. The word, empty, is of Old English origin, *emptig*, meaning idle or vacant.

The letter, 'p', called by semanticists 'an ex-crescent letter' was added belatedly as seen also in words such as glimpse or sempstress (now usually spelled seamstress.)

The medical profession thus has access to a handful of words (lacuna, vacuole, void, cavity, empty-space) offering almost identical meanings. Some distinctions, necessarily, are drawn. Thus, if the abnormal space is very small, barely visible and in great numbers, the word spongiform might be employed. If of medium dimension, perhaps the word lacuna might be used. And if quite large, as encountered in tuberculous pneumonia, the lesion might then be described as a cavity. Usage, over the centuries, has sharpened the intent of erstwhile synonyms so that the sentence, "The hotel room is empty" is no longer equivalent to, "The hotel room is vacant."

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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 2009	12 Months Ending with January 2009		
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)	YPLL (c)
Diseases of the Heart	198	2,606	248.0	3,055.0
Malignant Neoplasms	155	2,283	217.3	6,600.0
Cerebrovascular Diseases	33	417	39.7	650.0
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicide)	37	553	52.6	8,576.5
COPD	56	486	46.3	432.0

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	July 2009	12 Months Ending with July 2009	
	Number	Number	Rates
Live Births	1,066	12,412	11.6*
Deaths	768	9,486	8.9*
Infant Deaths	(0)	(88)	7.1#
Neonatal Deaths	(0)	(69)	5.6#
Marriages	679	6,433	6.0*
Divorces	234	2,835	2.7*
Induced Terminations	367	4,345	350.1#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	56	824	66.4#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(51)	(724)	58.3#
20+ weeks gestation	(5)	(100)	8.1#

(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 1,050,788

(c) Years of Potential Life Lost (YPLL)

Notes: Estimated total population for Rhode Island has been updated in this month's rates.

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