

Physician's Lexicon

Oh, My Sacred, Aching Back

A mistranslation of a word in Galen's text has resulted in a curiously inappropriate name given to some of the lower vertebra of humans; and belatedly, provided a battle cry for American paratroopers.

Galen had used the Greek adjective, *ieron*, meaning strong, to define the fused vertebra below the lumbar spine. Some anonymous scribe then wrote the word as *ieroun*, meaning, in Greek, sacred. And thus the phrase was rendered in Latin as *os sacrum*, meaning the sacred bone or, merely, the sacrum, certainly not Galen's intent.

The Latin root, *sacer*, meaning holy or consecrated, became the ancestor of many English words including sacerdotal, sacristy, sanctum, sacrifice, desecrate, sacrament and even cascara sagrada (a widely employed herbal laxative, of

South American origin, literally meaning the sacred bark.)

The Greek word, *ieron*, has also given rise to a multiplicity of English words and eventually—by a circuitous pathway—to the cry of American paratroopers.

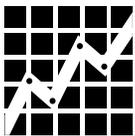
The lexical offspring of *ieron* include the English words, hierarchy, hieratic, hieroglyphics (sacred script), hierolatri (the worship of saints), and amongst medical terms, hialgalgia (lower back pain), hieromania (religious insanity), and hierotherapy (faith healing.)

Hieronomos, the Greek term meaning the sacred name, is translated to English as Jerome, and to Spanish as Gernimo. The 19th Century Chiricahua Apache leader, Goyathlay, was named Gernimo—or Geronimo, by the American cavalry seeking to imprison him.

In an American movie depicting the life of Geronimo, circa 1940, there is a scene of the Apache warrior escaping imminent capture by the American military by a breathe-taking leap off a cliff. In this scene, Geronimo shouts in exaltation as he descends. And thus, when the 82nd Airborne Division refined its parachuting skills beyond 1940, it became routine to shout "Geronimo" when leaping into thin air.

Amongst civilians, however, the cry continues to be, "Oh, my aching back" when the articulation of their sacrum yields to the stresses of a lengthy bipedal existence.

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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			
	March 2009	12 Months Ending with March 2009		
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)	YPLL (c)
Diseases of the Heart	207	2,457	233.8	3,130.0
Malignant Neoplasms	191	2,251	214.2	6,177.5
Cerebrovascular Diseases	36	409	38.9	667.0
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicide)	45	554	52.7	8,726.0
COPD	58	484	46.1	414.6

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	September 2009	12 Months Ending with September 2009	
	Number	Number	Rates
Live Births	1,021	12,354	11.6*
Deaths	760	9,594	9.0*
Infant Deaths	(8)	(85)	6.9#
Neonatal Deaths	(8)	(68)	5.5#
Marriages	833	6,316	5.9*
Divorces	425	3,090	2.9*
Induced Terminations	254	4,268	345.5#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	77	790	63.9#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(74)	(706)	57.1#
20+ weeks gestation	(3)	(84)	6.8#

(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)

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