Physician’s Lexicon

The Cleansing of Blunt Language

The profession of medicine has often been accused of using big words to hide stark realities, of masking uncomfortable situations that are customarily described by less decorous, blunter, more readily understood Anglo-Saxon words. The ancient Greeks had a word for this; they called this process of employing courteous circumlocutions, euphemy. The eu- prefix denotes good, well or normal, as in words such as eucaryote, eugenic (healthy birth), euglobulin, Eugene (nobly born), euphoria (well-being) but not eunuch (derived from the Greek root eune meaning bed).

If euphemy defines a good word, then blasphemy describes its opposite, to speak impiously of someone or something. The Greek root, blas-, denotes something ill or obscene.

In the interests of clarity and availability to physicians of all nations, medicine confines most of its technical vocabulary to the two languages that were, at one time, universally understood by its practitioners: classical Greek and Latin. Still, the lay public contends that a simpler assortment of words should be employed when physicians talk to them about their immediate illnesses.

Admittedly, medicine does not deliberately offer the arcane term, endorhinocurettage as a synonym for deliberate nose-picking, although the euphemism is certainly more polite. Nor is the profession thinking of substituting “radiation enhancement device” for atom bombs. Nor yet has medicine furthered such commonly encountered circumlocutions as judicially-sanctioned execution or capital punishment for state murder; or strategic misrepresentation for diplomatic lying. We as a profession are guilty, however, of renaming plastic or reconstructive surgery as esthetic surgery, and rheumatology as articularly-challenged medicine.

And though blasphemy had its roots in ancient Greek, it wended its way through a succession of Germanic languages including Middle English as blâfmen, meaning to speak ill of someone. The -pheme root has its origins in a Greek word meaning fame, renown or voice. Aphemia, an obsolete term for motor aphasia, is the inability to express thought in articulated language it is a word coined by the neurologist Paul Broca (1824 – 1880).

George Bernard Shaw once observed that all great truths begin as blasphemies.

— Stanley M. Aronson, MD