Physician’s Lexicon

Those Heart-felt Words

A surfeit of English words pertain to the heart and its many alleged emotions: heartache, heartburn, heartbeat, heartthrob, heartless, heartsick even heartily, indicating that the common folk appreciated the essential nature and function of this thoracic organ long before William Harvey explicated its physiology to the world of medicine.

The English word, heart, descends from the Saxon, hertæ, the Old High German, herza, and the Gothic, hafttæ. These many ancestral terms share meanings suggesting something that is in the center of or amidst.

The Classical Greek term for heart was cardia, and its Latin cognate, cor. These Mediterranean forebears have given rise to a wealth of terms pertaining to the heart and its many functions, alleged or verified.

Thus the Greek precursor, cardia, is transformed into English words, like cardiac, myocarditis, endocardium, cardiogram and cardialgia, an obsolete term for angina pectoris (Greek, -algia, meaning pain such as in myalgia or neuralgia).

The word, cardinal, on the other hand, comes from the Latin genitive, cardinis, meaning a pivot, a hinge, or something essential. (the church prelate, cardinal, is an abbreviation of cardinis ecclesiae Romanæ).

The Latin, cor or cordis, has generated many English terms pertaining to the heart such as cordate (heart-shaped), cordial (literally, from the heart), core (something central) and courage (but not courteous which stems from the Latin, coors or cohors, meaning an enclosure or courtyard.)

The root, cordis, gives rise to a variety of essentially non-medical words such as accord, to be in harmony with, to agree, to be of one heart; and the many etymologic variants of accord such as discord, concord, record and even the musical instrument, the accordion. The word, courage and its many variants also stem from the Latin cor. And misericordia is Latin for compassion or mercy.

Coronary, on the other hand, is taken directly from the Latin, coronarius, and defines anything pertaining to the crown; it derives originally from the Latin, corona, a crown, a garland or something that encircles and is related etymologically to the Latin, cor. A coroner, thus, is a representative of the crown; and a coronary artery is a vessel that encircles the heart.

– Stanley M. Aronson, MD