

Physician's Lexicon

Medical Terms, Up to the Letter 'Z'

The medical profession has been accused of employing polysyllabic words unnecessarily despite their pleas that medical terminology represents a deliberate marriage of clarity and simplicity. The vernacular words—the ambiguous street names—describing anatomic parts and human ailments have been carefully avoided since they may vary from one region to another. And while there may be borrowed terms from Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic and other Asian languages, the great majority of formal medical words are constructed deliberately from Classical Latin and Greek.

Medicine, perhaps more than any other profession, has relied upon abbreviations and acronyms to shorten its messages. And thus a standard hospital may possess an OB service, ICU units, an ER (now ED) at its side entrance, and of course a series of ORs. The meaning of such radiological terms as CT (formerly CAT) or MRI, are accepted by the lay population; and, at least amongst

medical practitioners, the meanings of the many abbreviations used by clinical pathology (such as CBC, BUN, UA, HGB, WBC, SGOT and countless others) carry no mystery.

The purpose of communication in medicine—between physicians or between a physician and a nurse, or between a physician and a patient (or surrogate), ideally at least, is to achieve brevity, minimal ambiguity and clarity.

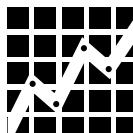
And what can be more concise, more brief, than an isolated letter? Consider the letter, 'Q'. Q Fever is now the widely acceptable word for disseminated *Coxiella burnetii* infection. And Q, by itself, is the universal symbol for coulomb, the metric measure of electric discharge. And when used by anesthesiologists, it represents the quantity of gas expended.

1895 witnessed the culmination of Wilhelm von Roentgen's experiments on the mysterious emanations generated by

electrical current passing through certain gases. For want of a better name he called them *X-strahlen*, X-rays, a term that has persisted. When he chose the letter X (to signify mystery) he must have been aware of the many uses that X had fulfilled. It was the universally adopted signature of the illiterate, the sign of a kiss in correspondence, and in Scotland, the symbol of a personal sign of allegiance to the Cross of St. Andrew.

And finally, there is the letter 'Z', the 26th and final letter of the current English language but the sixth letter (zeta) in classical Greek and not to be confused with omega, the 24th and last letter of the Greek alphabet. . The letter 'Z' has stood for so many qualities in the American mind, especially Zorro the masked avenger who left his first initial upon the skins of many miscreants, that medicine has consciously avoided it as a physical representation.

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Rhode Island Monthly Vital Statistics Report Provisional Occurrence Data from the Division of Vital Records

VITAL STATISTICS

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Underlying Cause of Death	Reporting Period		
	July 2010	12 Months Ending with July 2010	
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)
Diseases of the Heart	137	2,239	212.6
Malignant Neoplasms	146	2,265	215.1
Cerebrovascular Diseases	22	461	43.8
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicide)	28	621	59.0
COPD	24	492	46.7

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	January 2011	12 Months Ending with January 2011	
Live Births	Number	Number	Rates
	943	11,806	11.1*
Deaths		9,821	9.2*
Infant Deaths	(5)	(62)	5.3#
Neonatal Deaths	(5)	(57)	4.8#
Marriages	199	6,073	5.7*
Divorces	236	3,239	3.0*
Induced Terminations	382	4,216	357.1#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	59	698	59.1#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(52)	(631)	64.3#
20+ weeks gestation	(7)	(67)	5.7#

(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 1,053,209. (www.census.gov)

(c) Years of Potential Life Lost (YPLL).

Note: Totals represent vital events that 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