Physician’s Lexicon

The Limbs of Medicine

**Most anatomic terms are of Latin origin** but each organ, each body part, is also blessed with a vernacular name, typically of Anglo-Saxon origin. And thus words such as head, toe, leg, finger and arm are derived from Old English and earlier, from Proto-Germanic languages.

The word, limb, defining both arms and legs, is also of Old English origin: The word, *lim*, meant a part of, a member of, and in some Old-Germanic tongues it also meant a loose joint thus giving rise to the English words, limp and limber, meaning variously, looser, pliant or flexible. Limpid, on the other hand, stems from the Latin, *limpidus*, meaning clear, transparent; in turn, from the Greek name for a water goddess and from which the word, lymph, is derived.

The Latin, *limbus*, meaning edge or border descends without change to define the corneal margin or boundary of the tympanic membrane. A similar Latin term, *limus*, meaning slant or sidelong, evolves into the English, limit, meaning a fringe or boundary. (as in ‘the city limits’). The medical term, liminal (and subliminal), refers to the lower boundaries of sensation or sensations not felt.

The word, limbo, similarly comes from *limbus*, but now in its ablative form, to define a region between heaven and hell, reserved for saints and early church fathers (*in limbo patrum*). It was a region, a temporary station, assigned particularly to the patriarchs of the Old Testament awaiting entry into heaven; and for dead infants (*limbus puerorum*) similarly awaiting assignment to paradise.

A Greek word, *limne*, meaning marsh may be confusing. The older medical term, limnemia, means chronic malaria (marsh fever.) Yet another Greek root, *limos*, meaning hunger, appears in medical words such as limphthisis (emaciation) and limosis (starvation).

Alembic (a term defining medieval vessels employed for distilling medications) is from the Arabic defining ‘the cup.’

A lemniscus, defining a bundle of nerve fibers, has a complex etymological origin. The Aegean island, Lemnos, was famed for its colorful fabrics, giving rise to a Greek term meaning ribbon. This, in turn led to the Latin, *lemniscus*, meaning bands or ribbons.

— Stanley M. Aronson, MD