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The Many Qu- Words of Medicine

STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

The letters Q and U, joined in etymological wedlock for centuries, form a small complement of clinically-related words of Latin, Greek and sometimes Germanic origin. In a standard medical dictionary of 1,660 pages, words beginning with QU make up but four pages.

The Latin prefix, *quadri-*, meaning something consisting of four, begins such words as quadruple (as in quadruple bypass), quadragenarian (a 40-year-old), quadripara (a woman who has borne four children), quadrivium (the first year of the medical curriculum in the Middle Ages, literally, “where four roads meet”), quadriiceps (extensor muscle of four parts), and quadriplegia (paralysis of four limbs). The -plegia root is Greek, meaning blow or stroke. An alternate synonym, tessaplegia, renders the word entirely of Greek origin.

Quail, meaning to lose heart, derives from the Latin, *coagulare* (literally, to curdle.) And qualm, the feeling of faintness, is from a Greek word meaning smoke, or stupor. Quart derives from the Latin, *quarta pars*, the fourth part of a liquid measure.

Quality derives from the Latin, *qualitatum* (meaning how constituted); quantity, on the other hand, stems from *quantitatum* (how great, how many?).

Quasi-, a prefix from the conjoined Latin, *quam si* (meaning as much as or almost) appears in such medical terms as quasiplegic.

Quick derives from an Old High German word meaning alive (as in the phrase, “the quick and the dead”). And a pregnant woman’s first subjective awareness of her growing fetus is referred to as a quickening.

The prefix, quinque- is from the Latin, meaning five and may be used instead of similar prefixes (e.g., *cinque*- or *penta-*).

And then, there are a few Latin fixtures such as *quod vide* (meaning “which see” or q.v.) and *quod erat demonstrandum* (meaning “which was to be demonstrated,” often abbreviated as Q.E.D.).

And finally, there is the perjorative word, quack, meaning an incompetent, badly trained physician. The word is a shortening of *quack-salver*, from Old German meaning a hawker of worthless ointments (salves).
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Biographers of Howard Phillips (HP) Lovecraft cite **FRANKLIN CHASE CLARK, MD**, (1847–1915) as one of the horror master’s earliest literary influences. A distant relation to the Lovecrafts, the connection took root in 1902, when Dr. Clark married Lillian Phillips, Lovecraft’s beloved Aunt Lillie, when the boy was 12.

Dr. Clark was well suited to aid in the home-schooled Lovecraft’s tutelage. He had studied literature and the classics at Brown University (class of 1869). During that time, he also attended literary seminars given by Boston’s renowned poet and essayist, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

As a student, Clark shared Dr. Holmes’ medical and literary interests. He attended Harvard Medical School for a year, but completed his degree at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City in 1872. Dr. Clark then returned home to Providence and worked as a surgeon in Rhode Island Hospital’s outpatient department, eventually opening a private practice in 1882.

Dr. Clark was an active member of the Providence Medical Association, the Rhode Island Medical Society, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. He was a frequent contributor to the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*, and many others, but also wrote on historical, genealogical and general topics, such as the circus and hypnotism.

One of his articles, “A Curious City,” appeared in 1878 in the popular *Frank Leslie’s Sunday Magazine*. It is a fantastical yet scientific homage to the seemingly simple sponge and its underwater habitat, as seen in these excerpts:

> …Suppose, now, we take a piece of living sponge and place it under a microscope. The sight we then get is said to be truly wonderful. The water rushes with considerable force in and out of the larger openings called oscula…Indeed, they very much resemble little volcanoes in action, vomiting from their crater-like mouths the water tinged with various materials. The animals absorb through the pores or smaller orifices (byways) the oxygen and other food carried in by the water…thus it will be seen that the sponge has a circulation which answers to the circulation of the blood in the higher animals…

These illustrations appeared in the article, showing a rare glass sponge dredged up in the Mediterranean Sea near Gibraltar and a sponge plant.
When the animals are destroyed, the soft gelatinous material decays and leaves behind the sponge...

...And now, after describing my little [sponge] city – a strange one at that – and after showing how many different kinds of cities there are, from the rude habitation to the elegant and beautiful structure, we leave the animal a fossil, a worn-out city, buried beneath the ruins of other cities, which, like this, help build up the foundations of the earth...

In his later letters, Lovecraft wrote of his uncle: “He began to influence my intellectual development. He was a man of vast learning...His historical attainments were likewise immense.” He also wrote he hung on his uncle’s “every word.”

After HP’s father died at Butler Hospital of neurosyphilis, and then upon the demise of his beloved grandfather, Dr. Clark became a stable figure in the boy’s life. It appears the physician’s classical interests (he translated and published the works of Homer, Virgil, and Lucretius) resonated with the young Lovecraft, who had a keen interest in Greek and Roman mythology since he was very young. According to one HP biographer, Dr. Clark helped his nephew compile a “Manual of Roman Antiquities.”

He also encouraged HP to continue his interest in chemistry and astronomy, and publish what were then called “weird” tales or fiction – the precursors to the horror, fantasy and science fiction genres.

One Lovecraft scholar suggests a number of HP’s kindly but erudite physician characters may have been based on Dr. Clark, who died on April 26, 1915, of a cerebral hemorrhage, at the age of 67. Lovecraft wrote an elegy for his uncle, which appeared in Providence’s Evening News.

Much of Dr. Clark’s writings, including many historical tales of Providence are in collections at Brown’s John Hay Library and the Rhode Island Historical Society.

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Dr. Franklin C. Clark was a prolific writer. “A Curious City” appeared in one of the most prestigious illustrated publications of the 19th century, Frank Leslie’s Sunday Magazine.