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What’s in a Name? The Medical Profession

STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

A name may serve to identify an occupation or a profession, but rarely does it clarify the profession’s essential purpose, its evolving history or the many advances it has achieved since the name had been adopted. Consider, for example, some names of ancient origin associated with modern medicine.

The word, physician, has a bicameral past. The Greek noun, phusis, meaning to bring forth or even ‘the nature of things’, served to define the study of the natural world in all of its aspects. Accordingly, two closely related names arose: phusike episteme (the study of nature) and phusike (the student of nature). And so one branch evolved into the English, physics, the science that studies energy, matter, force and motion; and physic, the alternate medieval term for a medical doctor (or physician). The boundary between physics, the science, and physic, the practice of medicine, remains quite porous. A physic, of course, defines a laxative or purge. But a physicien, in French, means a physicist; while a physician, in English, defines a practitioner of medicine. The ambiguity prevails with English words such as physique, physiology, physiotherapy and metaphysics.

The word, medicine, also derives from Greek, through Latin (mederi, to heal, and medicus, a physician) to its present connotation as a practitioner of the healing arts. Related words in English include medicate, medico, remedy and medicinal.

The word, science, has also followed a circuitous path. A Greek word, scierin, led to the Latin verb, scire, both meaning to know; and later, to scientia, a noun embracing the widening body of rational knowledge now including such studies as the many forms of the physical sciences. By the 14th Century, the domain of science was narrowed to embrace specifically those disciplines rooted in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, biology or physics, while the other learned disciplines such as poetry, painting, history and philosophic thought were subsumed by The Arts. A hint of the archaic meanings of science lingers in such contemporary English words as prescience, conscientious and omniscience.

When the insight and clarity of an occupation resists skeptical challenge, when it remains rigidly fixed in time, and when its purpose and accomplishment stay unaltered from the First to the 21st Century, it can no longer be called a science; as so, society now has a choice between the separated disciplines of astrology and astronomy.
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Just a little more than one year ago, NEWELL E. WARDE, PhD, executive director of the Rhode Island Medical Society, propelled the almost century-and-a-half *Rhode Island Medical Journal* into the e-world, with the sanction of Editor-in-Chief JOSEPH H. FRIEDMAN, MD, and Editor Emeritus STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD.

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