Medicine claims access to two tiers of equivalent words: the earthier, more generally monosyllabic terms of Germanic origin; and those derived directly from classical Greek and Latin, these being more polysyllabic, more typically the rhetoric of official documents and more often courteous euphemisms substituting for their equivalent yet blunter terms.

The profession of medicine has also long declared itself to be the guardian and definer of life’s beginnings and endings, the births and deaths of humans. And so, in most English-speaking nations, those scraps of paper announcing our arrivals and departures are called birth certificates and death certificates.

These names might have been of a more classical origin, but words such as birth and death are clearly understood by the most poorly schooled. They are words, not inherited from the classical languages of Rome and Greece; rather, these monosyllabic words are derived from Old German – blunt and unambiguous – and their antecedent words were widely known in England long before the vulgar Latin-speaking Normans invaded Britain in the 11th Century.

The word, birth, still proclaims itself on our certificates attesting to our arrival; it stems directly from the Old German giburt meaning a bringing forth; and from a more ancient Indo-European source, bher – meaning to carry or bear. The added Old Germanic suffix, -th, denotes a process, thus making the word a noun. Note that there are remarkably few collateral derivatives of the word, birth: perhaps stillbirth, birthright, bairn or birthings.

The word, death, also of Old German origin, yields few collateral words such as deadly.

The Latin words for birth and death, on the other hand, have spawned a virtual lexicon of derivative words: From the Latin, natalis, for example, came such words as nation, nativity and natural; [but not derivatives of natatus, meaning the act of swimming.]

The Latin, mortalis, means death, and from which arose English words such as mortality, morbid, morbilli (measles), mortgage, mortician, mortise, mortuary, amortize and mortmain.

The Greek root for death, thanato-, has yielded such English terms as thanatology, thanatopsis and euthanasia.
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August 1929: Vintage Case Report – Beware the White Rabbit
A Cautionary Tale of Rabbits, a Young Man and the Family Cat

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

In the August 1929 issue of the Rhode Island Medical Journal Dr. Arthur G. Randall of Providence reported on an unusual case. He was called to see 19-year-old Allen T., who lived with his family in a three-room house nestled in woodland in North Scituate.

The youth had been feeling poorly for several days and upon examination, Dr. Randall discovered a “small open wound at the base of his right forefinger.” The boy had a fever of 102, felt chilled, even though the room was “suffocating from the heat of a fire in the family stove.”

Dr. Randall’s impression was a case of late-season influenza.

Several days later, the boy’s parents took him to see Dr. Randall at his home “in an automobile.” After visiting back and forth for 10 days, the boy’s father reported finding two dead rabbits near the house just prior to the boy’s illness.

Indeed, Allen T. said, he had found a dead rabbit near the house and “tore it to pieces and fed it to the cat.” Unfortunately, the cat died two days later.

This triggered the doctor’s memory of an AMA conference he had attended the previous year in Minneapolis, at which a Dr. Walter Simpson described “the first truly American disease – tularemia.”

Dr. Randall took a vial of the youth’s blood and hastened forthwith to the state laboratory, which sent it off Washington, DC, and the U.S. Bureau of Hygiene. It tested positive for tularemia.

Dr. Randall wrote up the case report, stating that, “in reporting this, the first case in this section of the country, it would seem well to bear the possibility of running across it in our work.” He noted that while a blood-sucking tick or fly may carry the bacterial infection, the great majority of cases come from the jackrabbit in the West and the ordinary cottontail and white rabbit or hare in New England.

Dr. Randall also issued a warning to hunters, farmers, market-men and laboratory workers to be “careful in working on the flesh of hares and rabbits, to explain its non-contagious nature man-to-man, and that thoroughly cooking the meat makes it safe to eat.”

If only Allen T. had known that, his cat would have had a tasty, rather than a lethal, meal.

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The American Medical Association awarded this medal in 1928 to Dr. Edward Francis for his contributions to the knowledge of tularemia, later called Francis’ Disease.