

LATIN AS USED IN MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

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We will take a tour through medical terminology, emphasizing its Latin origins. However, we must be mindful of several realities, such as the facts that the great Roman anatomists often used Ancient Greek terminology, and Latin usages themselves evolved through the centuries into various pronunciations and shifts in meanings, all in the process of becoming more modern languages, such as French. Medical terms have come into modern usage from each of the various stages of Latin evolution. To confuse the issue further, a single medical term may mix words derived from various languages.

Aristotle and Herophilus were the great anatomists of Ancient Greece, and coined many terms still in use today. However the single most influential anatomist of the ancient world was the Asiatic Greek, Galen. He is usually thought of as having been a Roman, because he practiced medicine in Rome, and where he wrote 59 books on anatomy. It is he that we must thank for most of today's Latin medical terminology.

Let's start with abbreviations used in writing medical prescriptions. To specify that a medicine is to be taken once a day, the abbreviation "QD" is used, which stands for "qui diem". The instruction to take a medicine twice a day is given as "BID", which is the abbreviation for "bis ins diem". Three times a day is "tres ins diem". Four times a day is "QID", or "quatuor ins diem". If a patient should take nothing by mouth, or is forbidden to eat or to drink, the phrase "NPO" is used, being the abbreviation for "non per os". If you think things stay this straightforward, the abbreviation for "every other day" is "QOD", which inserts the English "other" into what is otherwise a Latin phrase. If the instruction is to mix in so many drops, the abbreviation is "GTT", for "gutta". 'C' with a hyphen over it stands for "cum", or "with"; 'S' with a hyphen over it comes from "sans", and means "without". On the other hand, 'O' with a hyphen over it also can mean "without", or "no", or "none", and comes from the German word "ohne", which means "without".

Some descriptive terms used in anatomy are "dorsal", referring to the back, "ventral" meaning the belly side of the body, comes from the Latin "ventralis". "Lateral" means "to the side of", while "medial" means to the middle or center. "Distal" means "far", and "proximal" means "near".

Some Latin terms for organs have come directly into English, such as "stomach", coming from the Latin "stomachus". However, the medical term for "stomach" is "gastrum", and comes from the Ancient Greek. "Antrum" is the Latin term for "cavern". The "gastric antrum" refers to the large cavity within the stomach, and thus mixes Latin and Ancient Greek. To confuse the issue further, the smooth stripes located in the stomach lining are called "Magen Strasse", which comes from German, and translates as "streets of the stomach".

“Callus” in Latin means “callus” in English. “Piliary” in medical terminology refers to the hair, and comes from the Latin word for a heavy javelin, a “pilum”. On the other hand, the Latin word for “hair” is “capillus”, which is the origin of the word “capillary”, or a small hair like blood vessel.

“Femur” in Latin means “thigh”, but in medical terminology it refers to the bone within the thigh. However, “humerous” in Latin means “shoulder”, but in medical terminology it refers to the bone in the arm.

The situation with the terminology for the head is interesting. The mainstream Latin word for “head” is “caput”, and in medical terminology is sometimes used to describe conditions of the scalp. The common Latin term used in medical terminology in reference to the head is “cephalus”, which is not mainline Latin, where it is used mostly in reference to a large swollen head, or to the origin of something, such as “the head of a stream”. Thus the muscle with two heads is the “biceps”, and the muscle with three heads is the “triceps”, and the four headed muscle of the thigh is the “quadriceps femoris”.

“Calva” is Latin for “skull”, and in Medical Terminology the term “calvarium” is often used.

The Latin word “varus” comes directly into medical terminology, and means “knock kneed”. “Valgus” similarly means “bow legged”.

“Vola” means “palm” in Latin, but in medical terminology is used only as an adjective, as “volar”, to describe the palm.

“Pedalis” is Latin for “foot”, and comes into medical terminology as either the adjective “pedal”, or as a noun “pedis” meaning foot. “Pedis planus” therefore means “flat foot”. To confuse the issue, the medical term “pediatrics” does not refer to the study of feet at all, but is derived from the ancient Greek “pais” corrupted to “paid” and means “child”, and “iatrikos”, or “related to medicine”, and together refers to the field of children’s medicine.

The Latin word for “skin”, or “cutis”, gives us the adjective “cutaneous” in medical terminology, but the medical terminological word for skin is “dermis”, which comes from the Ancient Greek for “skin”, or “derma”. The Greek and the Latin terms are used quite interchangeably. However, the medical term for “skin”, especially when meaning the ‘skin as a whole’, or as an organ, is derived from the ancient Greek “integumentum”, meaning ‘cloak’.

The “longissimus dorsi” is the Latin superlative form of “longus”, meaning “long”, and “dorsum”, and refers to the longest muscle in a person’s back, or, for that matter, within the entire body.

The Latin word for “heart” is “cor”. However, the imaginative Roman anatomists thought that the human heart looked like a human head with a crown on it. The crown was a large circling vein that sits on top of the heart. The Latin word for “crown” thus became “corona”. The term moved into French, where the term reverted to an adjective referring to the heart, and thus into English medical terminology as “coronary”. “Heart”, by the way, comes from Old German “Hardt”.

Latin phrases are sometimes preserved in their entirety from the ancient physicians. For example, medical students are taught today the definition of ‘inflammation’ in the original Latin ie. “tumor, calor, rubor, and dolor”, which translates as “swelling, heat, redness, and pain”. To confuse the issue, however, a modern doctor would use the Ancient Greek “erythema” when he wants a word for “red”, though if he reaches for an adjective, he may use either “ruberous” or “erythematous”.

We see, therefore, that modern medical terminology is a language all its own, using primarily terms derived from Latin, but also freely incorporating ancient Greek, German, and modern English terms. Also, sometimes the Latin has entered medical terminology in a derivative form, caught in the very act of evolving into one of the Romance languages, such as French. A voyage through medical terminology is a time warp through all our cultural and scientific history.