From Shakespeare to Star Trek and beyond: a Medline search for literary and other allusions in biomedical titles

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Abstract

Objectives To document biomedical paper titles containing literary and other allusions.

Design Retrospective survey.

Setting Medline (1951 to mid-2005) through Dialog Datastar.

Main outcome measure Allusions to Shakespeare, Hans Christian Andersen, proverbs, the Bible, Lewis Carroll, and movie titles, corrected and scaled for five year periods 1950-4 to 2000-4.

Results More than 1400 Shakespearean allusions exist, a third of them to “What’s in a name” and another third to Hamlet—mostly to “To be or not to be.” The trend of increasing use of allusive titles, identified from Shakespeare and Andersen, is paralleled by allusions to Carroll and proverbs; the trend of biblical allusions is also upward but is more erratic. Trends for newer allusions are also upwards, including the previously surveyed “paradigm shift.” Allusive titles are likely to be to editorial or comment rather than to original research.

Conclusions The similar trends are presumably a mark of a particular learnt author behaviour. Newer allusions may be becoming more popular than older ones. Allusive titles can be unhelpful to reviewers and researchers, and many are now clichés. Whether they attract readers or citations is unknown, but better ways of gaining attention exist.

Methods I searched Medline (1951 to date) by using Dialog Datastar in the second half of July 2005. I thought of possible allusions and then searched methodically for them, limiting the search to titles and using the most appropriate method of searching. I mainly used NEXT, which locates words following one another within five words. For some searches, the only way of identifying allusions was to count from scanned lists of titles; for example, searching for many short common words is not possible, even in explicit phrases such as “to treat.”

I used Boolean operators as appropriate.

To compare the more popular allusions, I corrected the number of hits for the total number of papers published per five years: 1950-4 counted as unity, and the last complete period 2000-4 counted as 5.65. I adjusted this corrected number arbitrarily to 100 for each compared allusion. I made no formal statistical comparisons. Titles from 2005 were not included in these comparisons, but some are included in totals mentioned in the text.

Results Shakespearean allusions I found 559 allusions to “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Romeo and Juliet). Almost all contain “What’s in a name;” and a few are imaginative—for example, “A flap by any other name would be as rose-colored.”

Hamlet is a rich seam. “To be or not to be; that is the question” is possibly the best known quotation in English literature, but awkwardly the allusion does not need the second part of the quotation. I thought of single syllable verbs that indicate medical decisions: I found 244 “to treat or not to treat,” 96 “screen,” 53 “tell,” and 78 assorted others. Clone first appeared in 1997. Test gets 3505, mostly irrelevant and too many to scan but including the outrageous pun, “To test or NOD-2 test: what are the questions?”

“Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” provides 11 titles, including, “Is it Ig Nobler for science to suffer the slings & arrows of outrageous foolery?”, which, coming from JAMA, could not be claimed as a product of the medical tabloid press. Five seas of troubles and two consumma-

Supporting material is on bmj.com
A fistful of T cells (Br J Rheumatol 1998;37(6):602-11)
What's in a name?

Allusive titles are undoubtedly eye catching on journal title pages or Medline screens. Whether they really do attract readers or citations is difficult to know; it would mean comparing citations in similar fields for allusive and non-allusive titles. Thinking of possible allusive titles looks like editorial and comment rather than original research, and the mouths and babies listing, although small, supports this.

DeBakey warned about colloquialisms and readers who do not speak English. Shakespearean allusions are uncommon in non-English papers, but more pertinent is the fact that bare titles such as “Much ado about nothing” or “Back to the future” are difficult to index and mean nothing to the reviewer or researcher.

Allusive titles are undoubtedly eye catching on journal title pages or Medline screens. Whether they really do attract readers or citations is difficult to know; it would mean comparing citations in similar fields for allusive and non-allusive titles. Thinking of possible allusive titles in the first place is difficult enough. Many have certainly been used enough that they are clichés, perhaps more likely to annoy than appeal. Better to think of something truly original and imaginative.


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1 Atkin PA. A paradigm shift in the medical literature. BMJ 2002;325:1450-1.

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