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When I use a word . . . New medical words 1422–1972

An exploration of the introduction of new medical words into English over time reflects the development of different medical activities. New words that first appeared at 50 year intervals, starting in 1222 and ending in 1972 (n=3886), as logged by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, include 312 new medical terms. Relatively few medical terms were introduced into the dictionary in those years until 1622. Terms from anatomy and pathology dominated in the 17th and 18th centuries. Terms from biochemistry and pharmacology started to appear in the late 19th century, and terms from genetics and microbiology in the early 20th century. By the mid-20th century new medical terms became more common as a percentage of all new entries, and most specialties contributed, with pharmacology and, to a lesser extent, biochemistry dominating.

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Anniversaries of medical words

In weekly opinion columns published in *The BMJ* between 8 October 2020¹ and 21 May 2021,² I analysed medical words that had been logged in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as having first been recorded in the 50 years since I graduated as a doctor in 1970. I found a preponderance of pharmacological words, 32% of all new medical words during that time, compared with 19% from biochemistry, 12% from microbiology, and 6% from genetics.

Having recently compiled a list of some medical anniversaries in 2022,³ I wondered if an exploration of the anniversaries of the origins of medical words might give information about the topics that dominated medicine at different times in the past.

New medical words 1422–1972

I have searched the *OED* for words that were newly recorded at 50 year intervals from 1222 onwards; there are 3886 of them, from à la Chinoise to zilla. Of those, 312 are related in one way or another to medical activities, and I have categorised them under various subheadings, such as anatomy and physiology, pathology and microbiology, biochemistry and pharmacology.

1422–1622

I have found only eight medical words in the five anniversary years from 1422 to 1622. Six of them are obsolete, the other two being “gouty” and “bedpan.” The former appeared in a verse by the poet and clerk Thomas Hoccleve (1368–1426), published in a set of tales titled *Jereslaus' Wife*:

“Potagre and gowty & halt he was eek,

And was in other sundry wyse seek”

[“He was also podagrous, gouty, and lame,

And other diseases riddled his frame”]

A bedpan was originally a pan used to warm a bed; it took on its other meaning only in the middle of the 17th century, in Edmund Gayton's *Pleasant Notes on Don Quixot*, in which he refers to “backward memento's [that] came so fast, that ... No Bed-panne was sufficient, nor the Tub for that purpose.” The text, the rest of which is highly vivid, describes what

happened when Sancho Panza took a little too much (“a dose over-proportioned”) of a remedy, panchymagagon fustifugum, from which his master had benefited. Not quite such a pleasant account as Gayton's title had promised.

1672–1772

In 1672, 1722, and 1772 the numbers of new medical words increased gradually to 7, 12, and 19, respectively. Some came from anatomy, reminding us how Latin terminology dominated the subject, including membrum virile, the penis, and armilla membranosa, “the various ligaments encircling the wrist and enclosing the tendons of the hand, considered as a single structure.” However, most of them were terms from pathology, citing texts such as the 1722 edition of John Quincy's *Lexicon Physico-medicum* (whose various editions contributed 128 entries in the *OED*, including gumma, monorchis, and recrudescens); David Macbride's *Methodical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Physic* (23 entries in all, including carditis, mesenteritis, and otitis); and John Gregory's *Elements of the Practice of Physic* (enteritis).

1822–1922

In 1822 there was a large increase in the numbers of new words, 74 in all, persisting in 1872 (73), and 1922 (68), each in its period representing about 11% of all new words.

In 1822, words from pathology continued to dominate, in texts such as *The Study of Medicine* by John Mason Good, which contributed 126 first citations to the *OED*, not all of them medical, but including clonus, ecthyma, gum-rash, hemiplegic and paraplegic, infarct, laryngismus, and spasticity.

Anatomy also continued to contribute new words, including periosteous and subserous. But at the same time other disciplines started to appear. Physiology, for example, supplied motility and pharmacology narcoticism.

More specialties start to appear in 1872, including biochemistry (amyloid) and surgery (oophorectomy, orchidize, and rhizotomy), while pharmacology contributed pharmacognosically and quinamine. At

this time, terms for tumours also started to appear, including adenocarcinoma and psammoma.

In 1922 we see the emergence of terms from genetics, such as ameiosis, genospecies, and tetrasomic, and psychiatry, such as Pavlovian, post-Freudian, and psychologically. And names of medicines start to appear more frequently, notably Bayer 205, later to be known as the trypanocidal drug suramin. At about this time eponymous terms began to make their mark; the list includes Rouget cells, the Schilling test, Schönlein-Henoch purpura, later to be better known as Henoch-Schönlein, the Schultz-Charlton test for scarlet fever, Simmonds' disease, and Sternberg-Reed cells. As I have previously shown, medical eponyms were relatively scarce before the 1920s.⁴

1972

Fewer new medical words appeared in 1972 than in each of the three immediately previous anniversary years, 51 in all, but as a higher percentage of all newly listed words than before (17%).

Pharmacology and biochemistry dominated and microbiology was also prominent. The new drug names that appeared during that year included acebutolol, oxamniquine, tamoxifen, ticarcillin, and valproic acid.

Conclusion

The sample of words that I have chosen based on anniversaries seems to have been representative of what we know about the history of developments in medical practice over the past 400 years. It appears that the history of medical developments in broad terms can be traced through an examination of the new words that those developments contributed to the language. It is also likely that a finer grained approach would elicit the time courses of specific developments within each subspecialty involved.

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