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When I use a word . . . Medical words newly logged in the OED in September 2021

Of 795 lexical items in the *Oxford English Dictionary* newly logged in September 2021, 29 have medical relevance, 20 of which relate to cardiology, showcasing some aspects of the history of cardiological developments in the past 165 years. “Anti-vax” and “anti-vaxxer” are newly recorded, but are by no means new to the language, since the first instance of “anti-vax” dates back to 1812. The newest term to enter the dictionary is “long covid,” which cannot be found before its occurrence in a tweet posted in May 2020.

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Medical words newly logged in the OED in September 2021

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) is updated every three months (“on a quarterly basis” as they put it—they mean “quarterly”). The list of updates and additions published in September 2021 contains 795 items in four categories, some of which have medical interest:

1. Words that are completely new to the dictionary. This list (224 entries) starts with “aegyo” (“cuteness or charm, esp. of a sort considered characteristic of Korean popular culture”) and ends with “zom-com” (a comedy film featuring zombie characters). Aficionados of this cinematic genre may have enjoyed watching such gems as *Kingdom Come* (2001), directed by Doug McHenry from the play *Dearly Departed*, and *Cost of the Living* (2011), directed by Daniel Lee White, which is actually a zom-rom-com, a subgenre term that has not (yet) made it into the dictionary.
2. New sub-entries. These are compound words or phrases that are included under other headwords (177 entries). The list starts with “Asian elephant,” one of 15 “Asian” or “Asiatic” entries, including the Asiatic tiger mosquito, *Aedes albopictus*, which is a vector of a number of diseases, including epidemic dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever.¹ It ends with “zombie worm.”
3. New senses of old words. This list (342 entries) starts with “adjacent,” which, in this newly logged meaning, is technically a postmodifier, describing something that is physically next to or very near the location or thing that it modifies; for example, a tooth next to a defective tooth has been described as a defect-adjacent tooth.² The section ends with, you might have guessed by now, “zombie.”
4. Additions to unrevised entries. New senses, compound words, or phrases that were already included as draft entries appended to the end of existing entries, now fully incorporated (52 entries). These are also included in the other categories.

Items new to the dictionary do not have to have been recently coined—the dictionary is constantly catching up. For example, the term “anti-vax,” with which we have all become distressingly familiar, first appeared in print in a letter from Edward Jenner to his friend

James Moore, dated 18 November 1812: “The *Anti-Vacks* are assailing me, I see, with all the force they can muster in the newspapers.” Jenner’s letter was published in John Baron’s book, *The Life of Edward Jenner* (1838). The scepticism about Jenner’s introduction of cowpox vaccine to prevent smallpox is well known, perhaps best in the 1802 cartoon by James Gillray.³

An even older new entry than “anti-vax” is “inactive” in the sense “Of a disease, infection, or infectious agent: present but not (yet) producing pathological changes or symptoms.” Inactivity during lockdown may have affected our mental and physical health, but there is no evidence that it has caused the virus to become inactive.

Of 29 items of medical relevance newly logged in the OED, 28 have dates of first record from 19 to 342 (median 108) years ago. The 29th, the most recent coinage to achieve entry, is “long covid,” which first appeared on 20 May 2020 in a tweet from @elisaperego78: “The #LongCovid #COVID19 is starting to be addressed...” The one-word hashtag variant, the commonly used form on social media, was soon replaced by the now familiar two-word term; in *The BMJ*, for example, it first appeared on 14 July 2020.⁴

Zombies and ghosts

Each time a new crop of words is listed in the section of the OED’s website devoted to updates, the lexicographers’ current areas of focus can readily be detected. In the September tranche, for example, there are 27 terms from Korea and, as we have already noted, “zombie” has also come in for attention. Apart from zom-com, noted above, the list contains the following:

ƹombie-like (1941);

ƹombie: “Philosophy. A hypothetical being which responds to stimuli in the same way as a normal person, but which lacks conscious experience” (1974);

ƹombie apocalypse or zombocalypse: “an imaginary event (as in a film, etc.) in which the world is taken over by zombies” (1982; 2007);

ƹombie: “Finance. A failing bank, business, etc., which relies on financial assistance from the government to continue operating” (1985);

☞ **Zombie worm:** “any of various marine polychaete worms [that] live on the bones of dead whales” (2005).

The dates in parentheses are the dates of the first identified examples.

But “ghost has had even more attention, 54 entries in all: 9 ghosts, 17 derivatives, from “ghostbuster” to “ghosty,” and 28 phrases from “a ghost at the feast” to “ghost train.” Very spooky.

Cardiological words

The largest cluster of related terms in the medical list, 20 of the 29, is devoted to cardiology, and the terms, with the dates of their first recorded instances, reflect the history of the subject, as the following selection shows:

☞ **Cardiometry** 1857

☞ **Cardiovascular disease** 1871

☞ **Cardioplegia** 1878

☞ **Cardiac output** 1894

☞ **Cardiac muscle** 1901

☞ **Cardiogenic** 1902

☞ **Cardiomyocyte** 1918

☞ **Cardiopulmonary bypass** 1956

☞ **Cardiopulmonary resuscitation** 1958

Pharmacological words

Four of the new entries have pharmacological relevance: Two are medicinal plants:

☞ **Cardiac:** “A medicinal plant (not identified; perhaps garlic mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*, hedge mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*, or motherwort, *Leonurus cardiaca*)”;

☞ **Cardiaca:** “A medicinal plant, esp. motherwort, *Leonurus cardiaca*.”

Both words are obsolete, as are the medicinal uses of the plants, at least in Western medicine.

The other two entries are “jake leg” and “jake walk,” both terms that describe “weakness or paralysis of certain muscles of the leg caused by the drinking of adulterated jake.” In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck describes how Uncle John “would drink jake or whisky until he was a shaken paralytic with red wet eyes.” Jake is derived from “Jamaican ginger” originally an alcoholic extract of the plant; later the term was applied to methylated spirits used as an alcoholic drink. The lexicographers might also have included “jake foot,” “jake hop,” and “jake paralysis.”⁵ As originally described,⁶ the condition resembles a peripheral polyneuropathy with features resembling that of Landry’s ascending paralysis, attributed, when it was first described in 1930, to contamination of the ginger drink with triorthocresylphosphate.

This tranche of words does not contain the names of any new medicines. The June 2021 tranche included remdesivir, whose efficacy in the treatment of covid-19 has fallen disappointingly below initial expectations. Other more effective medicines have emerged since then. Perhaps they will be included in future tranches.

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