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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:e370

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e370>

Published: 11 February 2022

When I use a word . . . St Bartholomew—onomastics and reputation

A management suggestion that the Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, which is part of the Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), should be renamed the QMUL Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry has not met with universal approval. The international reputation of Barts, founded nearly 900 years ago, is a major consideration in this plan. A better course of action would be to change the name of QMUL to St Bartholomew's University and call the school the Barts and the London Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at Barts University.

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In ancient lore one's name was one's identity, predicting one's fate; the omen, it has been said, is in the nomen. Knowing someone else's name conferred power over them. Gods such as the Egyptian Ra and the Hebrew Yahweh had secret and awful names. And in the fairy tale Rumpelstiltskin's downfall comes about when the well bred young princess discovers, as he thought she never would, that his name was Wrinkledforeskin.

The name of St Bartholomew has been the identity of Barts Hospital since it was founded nearly 900 years ago. Bartholomew was one of the apostles, as named in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), although in John he is called Nathanael, since his full name was Nathanael Bartholomew, the former being his given name, the latter his patronymic. When an Augustinian canon, Rahere, fell ill on a pilgrimage to Rome, St Bartholomew told him in a vision of vacant land in Smithfield; Rahere vowed that if he survived he would build a hospital there for the poor. So, in 1123 the priory of St Bartholomew and the promised hospital were founded, staffed by monks and nuns. Some of the patients came from the nearby Newgate prison.

In 1133 Henry I granted Rahere the right to hold an annual fair, Bartholomew Fair, giving Ben Jonson the title for one of his plays (1614).

During the time of the dissolution of the monasteries (1536–41), Henry VIII closed the priory, but he eventually re-established the hospital, granting it to the City of London and endowing it with property.¹

Queen Mary College was named after Mary of Teck (1867–1953; crowned 1911), a granddaughter of King George III and Queen Consort of George V. Barts became part of the University of London in 1900 and Queen Mary College did so in 1915. In 1989 the college merged with Westfield College, becoming first Queen Mary and Westfield College and then, in 2013, Queen Mary University London (QMUL). The college had already merged with Barts and the London in 1995 to form a school of medicine and dentistry.

Famous people who have been associated with Barts in one way or another include William Harvey (1568–1657), commemorated in Charterhouse Square by the William Harvey Research Institute, as are John Langdon Down (1828–96; John Langdon Down House) and Sir John Vane (1927–2004; the Sir John

Vane Science Centre).² Those commemorated at the Royal London in Whitechapel include John Abernethy (1764–1831; the Abernethy Building) and Sir Archibald Garrod (1857–1936; the Garrod Building).

Now there is a managerial proposal to rename the Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry the QMUL Faculty, making it one of three QMUL faculties, the other two being devoted to humanities and social sciences and to science and engineering.

Patronymics

The word patronymic comes from two Greek words, πατήρ, a father, and ὄνυμα, a name; in Hellenistic Greek the two were combined into a single word, πατρώνυμος, with the adjectival form πατρωνυμικός. So a patronym or patronymic is a surname that is derived from the name of your father, or more generally from that of a forebear. Originally people did not have surnames; their names took the forms commonly seen in the Bible, for example David, son of Jesse. Later on, these patronyms were converted into surnames, in different forms depending on the country and language.

Bartholomew

Bartholomew is a Hebrew name. “Ben” in Hebrew indicates “son of” and “bar” is the Aramaic equivalent. Benjamin, used as a first name or surname, means either son of my right hand or son of the south. Barmitzvah literally means son of duty or commandment. Besides the names that they use in diasporic societies in which they find themselves, Jews have Hebrew names. Mine is Yosef Kalman ben Shmuel, or Joseph Kalman, son of Samuel. Some Jews, on migrating to Israel, change their names from those by which they were known in their countries of origin. David Ben-Gurion, for example, the Polish born first prime minister of Israel, was originally David Gruen.

Baruj Benacerraf (1920–2011), an Argentinian of Jewish descent, won the 1980 Nobel prize for his work on the “genetically determined structures of the cell surface that regulate immunological reactions.”³ His surname means son of Asherov, and since Asherov is also a patronymic, son of Asher, a Hebrew name meaning blessed, Benacerraf looks like a double patronymic.

Bartholomew is a patronymic, from the name Talmai, who is mentioned in the book of Numbers (13:22) and whose name means “having many furrows,” in other words rich in land.

Bartholomew has several medical representatives. They include two Danish anatomists, Casper Bartholin, after whom an abscess, a cyst, a duct, and a gland are named, and his father Thomas Bartholin, who gave his name to the anus cerebri (the entrance to the aqueduct of Sylvius). Toussaint Barthélemy was a French dermatologist, whose disease is a form of tuberculosis. And the Barthel index is used to assess an individual's ability to carry out everyday tasks.

Some derivatives of Bartholomew are not so obvious. The German form of the name, Barthelmes, gives Meus, Mebius, and Möbius. So, Paul Möbius, a German physician after whom at least three different syndromes and a sign are named, was actually another medical Bartholomew.

Finally, consider the Oliver–McFarlane syndrome, a genetic disorder, congenital trichomegaly, that includes long eyelashes, pigmentary degeneration of the retina, and mental and growth retardation. What relevance does that have to Bartholomew? Well, the Gaelic equivalent of Bartholomew is Pharthaláin. And adding the prefix Mac (son of) gives MacFarlane, which is thus another double patronymic.

So, I was amused when I came across a paper,⁴ whose authors included both a Bartholomew and a MacFarlane, dealing with the accuracy of methods used to determine abnormal haemoglobins, one of which, discovered later, is, of course, haemoglobin Barts.⁵

Changing names

People change their names for many different reasons, the most common of which is marriage. A change of name may betoken a new phase in life and good fortune. Film stars may benefit thereby. One thinks, for example, of Miss Diana Fluck, who became Diana Dors. Less spectacularly, Frances Gumm became Judy Garland and played Esther Blodgett, who became Vicki Lester.

Institutions, however, afford less successful examples. Here we have the example of the Royal Mail, which discovered that “Consignia,” which is what it decided to call itself in 2001, at a reported cost of £1.5 million, was not a desirable designation.⁶ The name was ditched just over a year later.⁷

It is not clear why the management at QMUL want to drop the name of Barts. Perhaps they think, in these secular times, that a Royal connection carries more potential kudos than a religious one. But perhaps they haven't noticed the evidence that the more gender neutral an author's name is, the more citations their publications receive.⁸ And surely they're not afraid of the possible opprobrium associated with the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, although in these days of heightened historical sensitivities, one wouldn't be surprised.

The medical wing of QMUL, represented by the name of Barts, has a much greater international reputation than QMUL. To give this context, of nine Nobel prizes associated with QMUL, six were in the category of physiology or medicine. They are:

§Sir Ronald Ross (1902; discovered the life cycle of the malarial parasite);

§Edgar (Lord) Adrian (1932; the function of neurons);

§Sir Henry Hallett Dale (1936; discoveries relating to neurotransmission);

§Sir John Vane (1982; work on prostaglandins);

§Sir Peter Mansfield (2003; work on diagnostic magnetic resonance imaging);

§Sir Peter John Ratcliffe (2019; discovered how cells sense and adapt to oxygen availability).

Conclusions and a suggestion

The furore at the suggestion that the name of Barts and the London should be ditched in favour of “QMUL” clearly shows how foolish a proposal it is, given the major international reputation of Barts and the likelihood that a change of name for purely corporate reasons may be damaging.

The obvious solution is for QMUL to change its name to the St Bartholomew's University of London (Barts University). The current Barts and the London School would then become “Barts and the London Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry.” Everyone's reputation, including that of QMUL's other faculties, would thereby be enhanced at a stroke. Fans of the Simpsons might even cheer.

Competing interests: My associations with London hospitals include three months spent as a medical student on a Nuffield bursary at the Middlesex Hospital in 1969; I have at different times been an external examiner in clinical pharmacology and therapeutics in the London Hospital, Royal Free Hospital, St George's Hospital, and University College Hospital London Medical Schools; I have represented the Royal College of Physicians on appointments boards at St George's and St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical Schools; I have had research collaborations with members of St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School; I am an honorary fellow of the British Pharmacological Society, several of whose members and fellows are associated with St Bartholomew's Hospital, The Royal London Hospital, and other London Hospital Medical Schools.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned; not peer reviewed.

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