When I use a word . . . A short glossary of medical slang

Slang is the subject of a myriad dictionaries and other books, going back to the 17th century. However, dictionaries devoted solely to medical slang are rare. Schmidt’s *Dictionary of Medical Slang* is the only general text of which I am aware, and it is out of date and long out of print.

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Defining slang

I have previously defined medical terminology as a spectrum of types, from high to low:

- technical terms—jargon—slang—colloquialisms—cant.

The imperfections of this classification illustrate the difficulties in taming medical slang. Many terms that might be thought of as slang are better thought of as jargon, colloquialisms, or even cant.

Changes in the language occur very quickly in this area, perhaps faster than in conventional language and yesterday’s slang is no longer today’s, while today’s, newly minted, will not be tomorrow’s.

The large number of abbreviations, contractions, and acronyms that litter the field add further difficulties. Take, for example, DNA. When it stands for deoxyribonucleic acid it can be thought of as a technical term, although it might equally be regarded as jargon or even a colloquialism. However, when it stands for “did not attend” it slips towards the right side of the spectrum and is either jargon or slang; when used pejoratively it could be regarded as cant.

And since slang is largely spoken, rather than written, the origins of slang terms are often more difficult to trace than those of conventional words. Collectors therefore find themselves having to rely on word of mouth, literature that is hard to find, or fictional accounts.

This makes things difficult for the collector of slang terms and the lexicographer who tries to define them. However, this has not stopped enthusiasts from trying, and dictionaries of slang abound.

Dictionaries and glossaries

General dictionaries of slang have been around for a long time. One of the earliest, perhaps the earliest, was Richard Head’s 1673 text, *The Canting Academy, or Devil’s Cabinet Opened*, in which he described “the Mysterious and Villanous Practices of that Wicked Crew, Commonly Known by the Names of Hectors, Trapanners, Gilts, &c.”

Better known is Francis Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785). Grose began his preface by citing Le Roux’s “Satirical and Burlesque Dictionary,” suggesting that the several editions that that text had achieved would “apologise for an attempt to compile an English Dictionary on a similar plan.” Grose defined the vulgar tongue as consisting of two parts: cant “called sometimes Pedlar’s French, or St Giles’s Greek” and “Burlesque Phrases, Quaint Allusions, and Nick-names for persons, things and places.”

However, these texts did not deal with medical terms, and neither did *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words* (1859), supposedly written by “A London Antiquary,” but actually by its publisher John Camden Hotten. Hotten aptly defined slang as “that evanescent, vulgar language, ever changing with fashion and taste.” He did, however, include a few slang words used to refer to doctors: croaker or croakus, sawbones, and squirt, the last also referring to a chemist, by which he presumably meant a pharmacist or apothecary.

The great 20th century lexicographer Eric Partridge produced several books about slang, including *A Dictionary of the Underworld* (1950) and *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1961), both massive tomes.

Eric Partridge’s successor in the field, Jonathan Green, has written several dictionaries of slang, including *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* (2010), in three volumes, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) has also spawned *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*.

Hotten noted that “the universality of slang is extraordinary,” and that “the professions, legal and medical, have each familiar and unauthorized terms for peculiar circumstances and things,” as did other groups including “the cloth, ... every workshop, warehouse, factory, and mill throughout the country, ... the public schools of Eton, Harrow, and Westminster, and the great Universities of Oxford and Cambridge,” as well as sailors, soldiers, and even cabinet ministers—well, them the breaks.

And so it is that many other dictionaries have appeared, dealing with specialised slang. The field is enormous. There are dialect dictionaries, dictionaries of rhyming slang and Yiddish slang, Liverpudlian slang, Mancunian slang, and Glasgow slang, sexual slang, the slang of specific groups, such as *The Sailor’s Word Book* and *A Dictionary of R.A.F. Slang*, and even dictionaries that deal with single words, such as OK by Allan Metcalf and *The F Word* by Jesse Sheidlower, which was once referred to as “fouler English usage,” in an editorial in *The (London) Times*.

There is also a lot of activity online, including the Urban Dictionary (https://www.urbandictionary.com/).
Dictionaries of medical slang

On the other hand, dictionaries of medical slang are rare. The *Danktionary*, compiled by the coyly named Will B High, is a specialised lexicon of words about recreational drugs and their uses. Other texts include *A Dictionary of Slang Drug Terms, Trade Names, and Pharmacological Effects and Uses*. However, the only complete general dictionary of which I am aware is J E Schmidt’s *Dictionary of Medical Slang* (1959), long out of print and of course out of date.

Schmidt’s dictionary is an unusual hybrid of dictionary and thesaurus, or, as Schmidt calls it, a reversicon. Each entry is mirrored by an entry elsewhere giving the meaning of the original. For example, the phrase “siphon the bladder” is defined as “to catheterize the bladder” and “to urinate.” And the term also appears under the headwords “catheterize” and “urinate.” It is given as the only slang term for the former, but under “urinate” we are treated to 17 slang terms for the action: piddle; piss; pee-pee; pea; pump the bellows; squirt; water the fire plug; take a leak; go number one; siphon the bladder; spring a leak; dew off the lily; shake the lily; shake a sock; pump ship; leak; drain.

After all of which I need a break myself.

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