

Editorial

What do we mean by the word ‘catarrh’?

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‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I chose it to mean – neither more or less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean different things.’¹

Words change with time and may mean different things to different groups. The current usages of the word ‘catarrh’ relate to the patient’s understanding of it and the clinician’s training. Both of these can be compared to the dictionary definitions. Two previous studies have noticed the variation in usage between medical practitioners and patients.^{2,3}

The otolaryngologist uses it on three occasions; firstly during a cold where it describes an acute discharge from the mucous membranes of the nose and throat; secondly when a patient presents with a postnasal drip, chronic catarrh; and finally in chronic ear disease, eustachian catarrh. There may be an underlying sinusitis or allergy in some cases particularly when the patient has a postnasal drip. This usage is slightly different from the word catarrh as defined in the dictionary. Here it is excessive discharge or build up of mucus in the nose or throat or chest associated with inflammation of the mucous membranes.⁴

Patients describe a large number of complaints related to the upper respiratory tract, throat and chest as catarrh. There are many words used to describe various symptoms in the upper respiratory tract and the throat. Cultural usage affects the communication between doctor and patient. Birmingham has a large immigrant population that frequently describes any nasal symptoms irrespective of cause as ‘flu’. Patients notice the normal flow as well as any excess or variation. Exceptionally detailed observations are made by some of them. This is probably the commonest usage of the word, catarrh. Mucus is transported to the postnasal space and is swallowed. A postnasal drip may vary from ‘white’ through to a ‘purulent green’. A ‘yellow green’ postnasal discharge may be due to eosinophils in patients with allergic rhinosinusitis and used to be called ‘allergic pus’. It is often treated by patients without medical advice, and includes herbal remedies.

An Internet search with Google.com gave 26 200 hits. Treatments fell into three easily categorizable areas, conventional medications, herbal medications and surgery. One theory of the effect of catarrh was outside the scientific remit – if catarrh collects in the bloodstream, it congests the circulation and causes high blood pressure and finally apoplexy.

The herbal remedies were many and varied. Some included conventional medication such as ipecacuanha. Other remedies included various oils – essential and otherwise, herbs and spices including Lobelia, White Horehound, liquorice and ginger. Various other plant extracts were present in other cures, often taken as teas. The London laser clinic treated the condition with a CO₂ laser and offered a 70 per cent success rate. Other advice included taking and abstaining from exercise as well as a large number of special diets. The most unusual cure was the conversion to Christian Science with a success of 100 per cent in one reported case.

The origins of the modern word are from an early 16th Century French word ‘catarrhe’ that takes its derivation from the Latin ‘catarrhus’ which comes in turn from the Greek word ‘katarrhus’ meaning ‘katarrhein – flow down’ from ‘kata – down + rhein – flow’.⁴ *Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary* gives 15 different uses of the word but states that the word has been practically eliminated from the scientific vocabulary.⁵ Physicians may come across hay fever described as autumnal or Bostock’s catarrh. Asthma has been called Laennec’s or suffocative catarrh.

Vesalius (c1560) thought that the pituitary gland (pituita, mucus) produced mucus or phlegm. Phlegm is the production of morbid or viscous mucus, especially when discharged through the mouth. It was one of the four humours of the body and is often applied to peoples’ approach to problems, phlegmatic. This is completely opposite to patients with a postnasal drip! Rheum is not often used today in English. It comes from the Greek, rhein. It describes a watery and mucous discharge from the nose and throat. Le rhume is French for the common cold.

While patients may change the meaning of a word, doctors can too. Rheum was used in conjunction with inflammation within other organs in the human body, the heart and joints for example. Rheumatic

fever used to follow a streptococcal sore throat. The word was then appropriated to other conditions of the joints, rheumatism in its various forms. The word, rheumatismus, is Latin and means catarrh. While patients and doctors use words to express themselves, they use common words in different ways and change the meaning along the way. A simple question such as, 'do you have catarrh', may mean something completely different to the doctor and the patient.

While Humpty Dumpty and Alice may have debated the meaning and usage of words, patients and doctors may have difficulty understanding common words, as the usage is different between them. It is clear that such consultations take place on the other side of the looking glass, particularly after an Internet search has taken place.

References

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- 3 Bloom H. Catarrh – a survey of general practice. *Practitioner* 1982;**226**:745–50
- 4 Hanks P, ed. *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*. London: Collins, 1979;237
- 5 Anon. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*. Philadelphia, London: W.B. Saunders, 1965

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