

Editorial

Welcome to the second volume and third edition of the Darlington and County Durham Medical Journal. We now have an ISSN number proudly displayed on the front cover which means articles in the DCDMJ can be properly cited.

We are pleased to welcome Tom Marsh as our Review Editor and junior representative. He has reviewed a number of fascinating new books in this issue. You will find a mixture of case reports, reviews and original articles ... enjoy!

“It is the inalienable right of every Englishman to pronounce foreign words exactly as he pleases”. So said Churchill.

Science - particularly medical science - depends on thousands of words borrowed from foreign languages. How should the English-speaking medical man or woman use these? Should we simply please ourselves - as Churchill suggests - or are there rules and conventions we should follow?

The scientific names of organisms are all Latin as are many anatomical terms. As far as pronunciation of these is concerned, Churchill is probably right. We really don't know for sure how Latin words were pronounced in the days of the Roman Empire and in any event (like English) pronunciation would have varied a lot from place to place and century to century. Londoners in Shakespeare's day would have sounded like country bumpkins to us. The Latin spoken on Hadrian's Wall in 300 AD probably sounded rather different from the Latin spoken in Rome in 100 BC. Even so we do often produce what can only be described as linguistic solecisms. An interesting example has come to the fore in the wake of media hype about “super bugs”, namely *Clostridium difficile* which of course as the scientific name of the bacterium is Latin. Most doctors and even the BBC pronounce *difficile* with a school boy French accent as *diffyseal*. Francis Pagan - who retired some years ago as microbiology consultant in Darlington - was careful to pronounce it with his best school boy Latin as *diffikilay* or sometimes with more of an Italianate or ecclesiastical flavour as *diffichilay*. On this one I fear the French has won over the Latin, and in any event a Roman time traveller overhearing the word would be puzzled as the term was hardly common in the days of Julius Caesar - the organism was only discovered in 1935.

If our pronunciation of dead classical languages is wrong no one is around to be offended. But what of modern foreign languages? Every medical student knows Behçet's disease has a habit of cropping up in lists of differential diagnoses ... but how many know how to pronounce it? Again (as with *C. diff*) the name tends to be Frenchified and pronounced *Baysay* - maybe because of the ç and because most of us have done French at school. But Hulusi Behçet was Turkish and his surname is pronounced something like *Behchett* with ch as in choice.

Pronunciation is one thing. Foreign grammar is another. Churchill again spoke for many in his autobiography *My Early Life*. When he first encountered Latin his teacher was taking him through the first declension - the word being *mensa* - a table.

Let him speak for himself:

“What does it mean, sir?”

“It means what it says. *Mensa*, a table. *Mensa* is a noun of the First Declension. There are five declensions. You have learnt the singular of the First Declension.”

“But,” I repeated, “what does it mean?”

“*Mensa* means a table,” he answered.

“Then why does mensa also mean O table,” I enquired, “and what does O table mean?”

“Mensa, O table, is the vocative case,” he replied.

“But why O table?” I persisted in genuine curiosity.

“O table – you would use that in addressing a table, in invoking a table.” And then seeing he was not carrying me with him, “You would use it in speaking to a table.”

“But I never do,” I blurted out in honest amazement.

Those of us who endured Latin at school can sympathise with the Great Man there! But nevertheless if we are to use Latin words at all surely we need to use them properly even if we are not planning to speak to tables. Plurals are a particular minefield. Except for a few irregular words – e.g. children, oxen - pluralising English words is easy. We just add an “s” or “es”. We can do just the same with foreign words which have become adopted as English words. Hippopotamuses is a perfectly acceptable plural of hippopotamus, and probably more correct than hippopotami as the word is of Greek rather than Latin origin. With medical Latin words we sometimes betray our ignorance of Latin (or pretend to know more than we really do) when we pluralise them. How often have we seen in radiology reports mention of diverticulae or septae? The plural of diverticulum is diverticula and of septum, septa. Bacteria is the plural of bacterium, but in common use is often treated as a singular - as is the word media which is the plural of medium, and data the plural of datum. One favourite of mine is meatus. I frequently vet MRI requests for “MR internal auditory meati please”. Very polite - but strictly incorrect. Meatus – a Latin word meaning a passage or channel, is in the fourth declension of nouns which means the plural is the same as the singular – meatus. I avoid the problem in my reports by referring to the IAMs! English has some words like this too e.g. sheep and fish, so we can’t be too sniffy about the Romans. Sinus, hiatus and fetus similarly are fourth declension, although the plurals for these are almost always anglicised, and no one tries the incorrect i ending so common with meatus. And I did, by the way, mean fetus not foetus. Fetus (from the Aryan root meaning grow) is the way the Romans spelt it and is not an Americanism. The Oxford English Dictionary says foetus is “incorrect”.

What can we conclude? English is a language of mixed ancestry – medical English even more so. We do not have an equivalent of the *Academie Francaise* telling us how we ought to speak or write the language. The only real rule is that we should so speak and so write that other educated English-speakers can clearly understand what we are trying to say. We should perhaps add that what we say or write should not offend them. If the reader knows a bit of Latin, diverticulae, meati and septae may be very offensive indeed!

Use common sense, try and use English words rather than foreign ones and if we do use foreign words try to get them right ... but without pedantry.

Although probably apocryphal, the saying attributed to Churchill when an overzealous editor or civil servant tried to over-correct his English got it right:

“This is the sort of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put”.

For further reading:

Churchill, W.S. (1930) *My Early Life*

Ronai, P.M. (1992) Pitfalls in Medical Writing – Plural Effusions, *American Journal of Roentgenology* 159, 564

Ronai, P.M. (1993) Pitfalls in Medical Writing – The Fourth Declension, *American Journal of Roentgenology* 161, 1064