

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 79 (2013)
Heft: [4]

Artikel: The jungle that is medical terminology
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943763>

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The jungle that is Medical Terminology

Many of us expat German-Swiss speak excellent English, yet when it comes to some specialty area we are unfamiliar with the local jargon. Medicine is one of those areas. After many misunderstandings over a long time, I would like to give you some hints.

Scientific Greek and Latin terms are frequently used in the Anglo – Saxon world. Take bones for instance: humerus (Oberarmknochen), radius (Speiche), ulna (Elle) are known to most, so are femur, tibia and fibula (Oberschenkelknochen, Schienbein and Wadenbein). Pancreas (Bauchspeicheldrüse), duodenum (Zwölffingerdarm), colon (Dickdarm) are other examples, whereas jejunum and ileum (Dünndarm) are often referred to as 'small bowel'. 'Dünn' is of course more accurate than 'small', it's some 7m long!

The ending - itis means inflammation: you will have heard of tonsillitis, sinusitis, bronchitis, appendicitis, colitis, pancreatitis, arthritis, dermatitis, cellulitis, meningitis just to name a few. Bear in mind, inflammation is not necessarily the same as infection. Inflammation means 'red and hot and swollen'. It can have a variety of causes, from viruses and bacteria, to allergy and auto-immune processes (the body fighting itself) and much more. So if you have any --- itis, you may or may not be recommended antibiotic treatment!

'Arthritis' in English may differ from the way we use the word in German: It translates as 'inflammation of the joint'. Again, there are many different causes, some of the best known ones are 'Rheumatoid arthritis', and 'degenerative arthritis'. Rheumatoid arthritis happens at any age, even children. It is one of these auto-immune conditions, can be very disabling and deforming. Degenerative arthritis is what we call 'Arthrose' in German – the 'wear and tear' variety.

Do you have an ache? Or is it a pain? Or a hurt? It could be sore? Or tender? Is it stabbing, throbbing, burning? I am still struggling with some of these terms, and the way people use them. It is very helpful to describe your discomfort, but do make sure you and your doctor mean the same thing when you explain. One very convenient word in English is 'tender', which means 'it hurts to touch'. We don't have an exact equivalent in German. When we discussed this article over Saturday morning coffee, Steve reminded me that meat is tender, love is tender, an offer can be a tender, boats and steam trains pull a tender..... Susie you must get a lot of stimulation in your editing from living with such a lateral thinker.

The stars in the eyes: Cataract means 'Grauer Star', a clouding of the lens of the eye. It is very common in older people, and fortunately can be treated successfully by replacing the lens. Glaucoma (Grüner Star) is quite different. It's a high pressure within the eye which damages the eye nerve and leads to blindness. People don't notice it until a lot of damage has been done. Damage can be largely prevented with drops and operations. It is really important to have your eye pressure checked by your optometrist from the age when you need your first reading glasses (even if you can buy those cheaply), around your mid 40s.

And a brief anatomy refresher of the eye: The sensitive outer membrane is called Cornea (Hornhaut), the coloured part Iris (Regenbogenhaut), the layer where all the nerve endings are that make us see is the retina (Netzhaut), with its central part the macula. The macula often degenerates in older people, another leading cause of severe visual impairment. The risk is

much higher in smokers. Sometimes the process can be halted with medications (injections into the eye). Combinations of vitamins / antioxidants help to prevent development.

A bit about mental health: Do you know someone who has had a nervous breakdown? The word is used in German too, Nervenzusammenbruch. It means various things to people.

The term 'someone broke down' is quite different. It is used when someone is overcome by crying. Then there is the 'meltdown'. Parents refer to a meltdown when their toddler or teenager lost it and behaved in a very distressed way. I often get the impression that the parents are not overly concerned about the underlying cause of these meltdowns.

Schizophrenia means the same as in German. Manic-Depressive illness is usually referred to as 'bipolar'. I feel many people are labeled 'bipolar' by relatives and friends, when it is not a true diagnosis.

Are you sensible? Same word – different meaning in English and German. When we call someone 'sensibel' in German, it means easy to upset, 'empfindlich', it has a negative connotation. It's very different in English: Sensible translates as 'vernünftig', reasonable. A sensitive person however is the one that gets offended easily. Intriguing, isn't it.

Don't read on if you have a queasy stomach: In my first year in general practice I asked a child whether he had spewed. My stepchildren were horrified to hear about my language, although I had learnt the word from them. Doctors only ask about 'vomiting', possibly about 'throwing up', definitely not about 'chuck, puke, chunder' which are all slang for vomiting. I also politely ask about diarrhoea, or may be 'the runs' or 'loose bowels' to avoid other less PC words. Whilst we are in the area, Haemorrhoids are commonly called piles.

What's below the ribs? I often find halfway through a consultation that someone's 'stomach' pain is not at all in the stomach (Magen), it can be anywhere in the abdomen. Other names commonly used for the area between your chest and your legs is gut, tummy, belly, and the Maori word puku (especially when it gets a bit larger than ideal).

And now the 'bits': I can't write this article without them – but don't expect anything exciting here! Although the English vocabulary is large in general and gives us a huge variety of names for genitals, most of them are not PC enough to figure in our magazine. Little boys have Willies, Winkles, Diddles, (abbreviated) Richards, or perhaps Doodles. Wikipedia gives you much more variety, about five dozen further terms. Not to forget the balls. A bit less variety of words with girls parts. Apart from 'fanny' I do not feel any of the terms are suitable for publication. Again, do some surfing if you are keen!

The take home message: When you see your health provider, do make sure you are talking about the same thing!

By Nelly Steinemann

