

Homonyms in medicine: A perspective

Khalid Al Aboud

Department of Public Health, King Faisal Hospital, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding author: Dr. Khalid Al Aboud, E-mail: amoa65@hotmail.com

In linguistics, a homonym is, in the strict sense, one of a group of words that share spelling and pronunciation but may have different meanings. Thus homonyms are simultaneously homographs (words that share the same spelling, regardless of their pronunciation) and homophones (words that share the same pronunciation, regardless of their spelling) [1].

One can find easily a name in medicine which be perceived as 2 different meanings [2]. Table 1, list few examples, and Table 2 [2-6], focus on few eponyms which can be misunderstood as related to countries.

Acronyms might be considered a major source for homonyms. Acronyms such as CHILD, CLOVE, KID, LEOPARD, NAME, and POEM might cause confusion to the patient as to the relation to the other meanings of these acronyms [7]. CLOVE syndrome stands for (congenital lipomatous overgrowth, vascular malformations, and epidermal nevus) [8].

The Eponyms are the most common type of medical names which may cause confusion with other names, inside and outside medical field [1]. A previous paper in this journal highlighted on this issue. From which I am copying the following segment; Similar name might be thought for and confused with another person, for example verrucous carcinoma of Ackerman is named after Lauren Vedder Ackerman (1905-1993) and not, A. Bernard Ackerman (1936-2008).

One may see also identical names for 2 different eponyms.

For examples “Sjögren” in “Sjögren’s syndrome” (Sicca syndrome), is named after Henrik Samuel Conrad Sjögren (1899-1986), Swedish ophthalmologist. Whereas, “Sjögren”, in “Sjögren-Larsson syndrome”,

is named after, Karl Gustaf Torsten Sjögren (1896-1974), Swedish physician, psychiatrist and inheritance researcher.

Similarly, “Stewart” in “Stewart-Treves syndrome”, (a malignancy that arises within chronic lymphedema), is different from the one in “Stewart-Bluefarb syndrome”. The latter is a type of acroangiokeratosis which was described independently by Stewart as well as by Bluefarb and Adams on the legs of patients with arterio-venous malformations. The term, pseudo-Kaposi sarcoma, is generally used synonymously with acroangiokeratosis of Mali, but is a broader term and includes both acroangiokeratosis of Mali and Stewart-Bluefarb syndrome.

As one more example, there are 2 “Bart’s” in the eponyms of dermatology. Dr Bruce J Bart, who is behind “Bart syndrome”, and Dr Robert Bart, who was one of the men behind “Bart-Pumphrey syndrome”. “Look-alike or sound-alike” eponyms are not rare. This is because there is extensive list of eponyms bearing the name of the same scientist.

Hutchinson’s sign, for example which can be seen both in subungual melanoma and ophthalmic herpes zoster. In such situations it is better to be more specific by adding the site of involvement when mentioning the sign, e.g., Hutchinson’s nail sign [9-10].

Warning

Medical practitioners should be vigilant about the homonyms in medicine in order to protect the safety of the patient. Care should be taken in spelling and pronunciation of medical terms to prevent any possible mistakes.

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Table 1: Few examples of Homonyms in medicine

The term	The first meaning	The second meaning
Calculus	Kidney stone.	Name of heel bone.
Dermatome	An Area of skin that send sensory information to spinal cord.	Surgical instrument used to make shallow, continuous cut during skin grafting.
"Down" syndrome (Trisomy 21)	From higher to lower.	John Langdon Haydon Down (1828-1896) was a British physician. He described the syndrome in 1866.
"Hunter" syndrome (mucopolysaccharidosis Type II, a lysosomal storage disease)	A person who hunts.	Charles A. Hunter (1873-1955), who first described it in 1917.
Hutchinson's sign	Pigmentation of the proximal nail fold as a sign of subungual melanoma.	Vesicles on the tip of the nose as indicator of ophthalmic zoster.
Pelvis	Funnel-shaped area in kidney.	Hip bones with sacrum and coccyx.
"Sweet" syndrome	Having the taste of sugar.	Dr Robert Douglas Sweet, who first described it 1964.

Table 2: Few eponyms who can be misunderstood as related to countries

Eponyms who can be misunderstood as related to countries	Remarks
Acroangiodermatitis of Mali [2]	Named for Dr Mali, who reported it in 1965. He described it in 18 patients having mauve colored macules and papules predominantly over the extensor surface of feet with underlying chronic venous insufficiency.
Cronkhite-Canada syndrome [3]	It is a rare disease characterized by diffuse polyposis of the gastrointestinal tract, diarrhea, weight loss, abdominal pain, cutaneous hyperpigmentation, dystrophic changes of fingernails, and alopecia). It was first described in 1955 by the American internist Leonard Wolsey Cronkhite and the American radiologist Wilma Jeanne Canada in the New England Journal of Medicine.
German syndrome [4,5]	It is, one of the "arthrogryposis" hypotonia syndromes, was named after German who with other authors reported the condition for the first time in 1975.
Poland anomaly [6]	It is a pectoral muscle hypoplasia/aplasia variably associated with ipsilateral thoracic and/or upper limb anomalies. Named for Sir Alfred Poland (1822-1872), who was a 19th-century British surgeon.

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