

# Medical gems

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### Abstract

Every discipline employs its own secretive words – jargon that allows initiates to communicate with one another in a way that excludes others. The world of medicine is no exception. The idioms used by doctors and surgeons range from the humorous to terms which seem designed to deliberately obscure the real meaning of the word. Other phrases stand out simply due to the incongruous pairing of everyday words. This article contains some real-life examples of all these because, as you know, sometimes words have two meanings.

## From business to medicine

Like a lot of you, I somehow found my way into medical writing. In my case my background is in business which, like any discipline, has its own argot to learn. I've always been impressed by words used in a certain (perhaps secretive) context. In business I was enamoured by jargon such as "Business Angels", who are people with money who fund start-up companies, or "MBWA", which means "Management by Walking Around".

The world of medicine is even richer when it comes to "special" terms. In this article I'd like to share with you some of the words and phrases I have come across as part of my daily work (mostly in trauma and orthopaedics), as well as some doozies I

have found online.

I am going to focus on accepted medical phrases, the meanings of which are not obvious at first to a layperson. I don't want to spend too much time on funny doctor slang and acronyms because the internet is already full of them. But if you like that kind of stuff, I recommend the paper by Fox *et al.*<sup>1</sup> which not only covers the history and cultural use of slang in medicine, but also highlights some terms apparently in use.

These include "DBI", which stands for the Dirt Bag Index. A patient's DBI is calculated as the number of tattoos multiplied by the number of missing teeth and is used to estimate the number of days without a bath! And are you already familiar with "granny dumping"? This is the practice of bringing elderly patients to emergency departments, for admission, usually before public holidays.

### Decoding medical words

When I first moved into clinical research from the world of business, I kept reading reports on surgeries which contained phrases like "chronic idiopathic orofacial pain" or "treatment of idiopathic clubfoot". I was surprised to discover that idiopathic actually means "of unknown cause". This is a very useful word to describe something you don't know!

Even more interesting to me was the word "iatrogenic", which kept cropping up in reports. For example, "neurophysiologic monitoring can predict iatrogenic injury during acetabular and pelvic fracture fixation" or "treatment of iatrogenic inferior vena cava occlusion". What does iatrogenic mean?

I learned it means any adverse condition in a patient resulting from treatment by a health care professional. In other words, instead of making you better your doctor has actually made you worse!

Debridement is when a doctor surgically removes foreign matter and dead tissue from a wound in order to aid healing. Personally

Nude mice are a type of hairless laboratory mouse with a genetic mutation and are often used in cancer research because they do not reject tumour cells from other mice or other species. I do wonder if they dress for dinner like human nudists...

I think it is also a perfect term to describe the moment a nervous groom bolts from the altar on his wedding day.

One of my favourite words in English has always been serendipity, which is when you happen upon something nice that you were not actually looking for. I guess that an antonym for serendipity could be incidentaloma. The term incidentaloma is a fusion of two words and describes a tumour (-oma) which is found by coincidence (incidentally).

This normally occurs during the course of examination and imaging for other reasons.

I am not the first to say it, but there is something about the term "nude mouse" that is unforgettable. Nude mice are a type of hairless laboratory mouse with a genetic mutation and are often used in cancer research because they do not reject tumour cells from other mice or other species. I do wonder if they dress for dinner like human nudists...

Don't like nude mice? Maybe you already know about knockout mice? These are laboratory mice in which researchers have inactivated, or "knocked out", an existing gene by replacing it or disrupting it with an artificial piece of DNA. An image of the Rocky of the mouse world comes to mind whenever I hear this term.

Creep resistance might sound like a woman telling some slimy guy in a bar to go take a hike but in fact it is a term used in materials science. It means a material's ability to resist distortion when under a load over an extended period of time. This is an issue, for example, in orthopaedic and craniofacial implants.

"Hangman's Fracture" is a C2 fracture of the spine which sounds cooler than it actually is. Despite its name, this fracture was not actually often seen in post mortems of people who were judicially hanged.<sup>2</sup> Similarly disappointing to me are "occult fractures". These do not result from accidents when witches and wizards get together but rather refer to cases where there are clinical signs of fracture but no



radiographic evidence.

I love to say the words “Wobbler Syndrome” but am glad that my dog doesn’t have this disease, which is a malformation of the cervical vertebrae. It causes dogs and horses to have an unsteady (i.e. wobbly) gait.

### Surgeons are different ...

While preparing this piece I asked an American trauma surgeon if there were any other words he could suggest for this article. Straightaway he said “Poor protoplasm.”

“What’s that?” I asked, somewhat naively.

“The patient’s body is a wreck”, was his droll reply. I googled it later that day. There were plenty of hits. A sentence in the first explanation I found<sup>3</sup> read, “Like pornography, there’s no formal definition for poor protoplasm, but doctors ‘know it when they see it.’”

Later that day in a meeting, the same surgeon used a word I had never previously heard: “grantsmanship”. A red wavy line appears under this word when you type it into a Word document. (However, the same program also tells me that other words do not exist when I know with certainty that

they do). Grantsmanship is a real word which the online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “the art of obtaining grants”.

A Brazilian spine surgeon at this meeting who sat at the same table at lunch talked about all of the motorcycle accidents in São Paulo.

“The number of fatalities is amazing. The transplant guys love it though. Lots of brain dead donors available for transplantation surgery.”

The American surgeon turned to me and said, “There you go, there’s another one for your article, riding the donorcycle.”

“Sorry?”

“The donorcycle, i.e. the motorcycle.”

As you can see, surgeons sometimes have a different take on how to describe the world around us ...

I hope that you enjoyed this somewhat light-hearted look at selected words used in the world of medicine. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further word suggestions for a follow-up article on special medical terms.

### References

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### Author information

Diarmuid De Faoite has been the EMWA Website Manager since 2012 and leads the EMWA workshop *An Introduction to Marketing for Medical Writers*. Although originally an academic business researcher, writing has always been his passion, regardless of the field in question.