

Deranged liver enzymes? Patients defaulting follow-up? To many readers of this journal these may be perfectly reasonable, self-explanatory terms. When I first encountered “deranged liver enzymes” in a case report, however, the phrase conjured up an image of crazed liver enzymes leaping out of their blood tubes and running amok in the pathology lab. As for defaulting patients, I wondered what their software requirements or financial problems had to do with their post-surgical care.

Both phrases are technically correct. The English word deranged comes directly from the French verb ‘deranger’—to upset/interfere with—and when liver enzymes go off the scale, they are indeed ‘upset’. But the word usually refers to something living—usually a human—who has completely lost control, either mentally or emotionally, and is, as the English like to say, ‘barking mad’.

The problem, of course is not our liver enzymes, but the terms we use to describe them. English has become the dominant technical language (don’t tell the Germans) but is far from precise. Not only that, it is a rapidly evolving language spoken in so many parts of the world and in so many different ways, that what is a widely understood term in Hong Kong has a reader from another part of the English-speaking world wondering just what liver enzymes get up to.

Some ‘regional’ terms do survive. One of my colleagues had a long correspondence with an author over the use of ‘opportunistic’ to describe breast screening performed on patients who visited their doctors with problems unrelated to breast conditions. The use of the term is indeed technically correct. The doctors involved had seized the opportunity to add value to the consultation by performing a breast screen, and therefore this was ‘opportunistic’ screening. A search revealed that while the term was not widely used in mainstream English journals, it did appear in papers from Eastern Europe, suggesting that speakers of English as a second language had adopted the term.

Why had it failed to cross over to general use when it seemed to serve the purpose so well? Mostly because in general use the term ‘opportunistic’ has negative connotations and is suggestive of someone waiting for a victim, rather than providing a valuable service. To me, the word ‘opportunistic’ conjures up an image of the medical practitioner leaping upon the unsuspecting patient and performing breast screening, something no respectable doctor would ever consider!

Nevertheless, given that the use of the term is growing, we allowed it because it did, in fact, describe what was done very accurately.



What arrives in research papers is a filtration of what is going on in our wards and consulting rooms. For instance, case histories in which “all jerks are normal” regularly turn up. ‘Jerks’ are western slang for inadequate, unattractive individuals, and yes, most of them are fairly “normal” (just not socially successful). Anyone reading that in case notes immediately assumes the reflexes were tested and found to be normal, but in a formal account, this does need to be expressed a little more clearly.

Then there is the old case notes favourite—which also appears in some case histories—‘physical examination was NAD’. While this is supposed to mean no abnormality detected, some of us, including this editor, have a sneaking suspicion it really means “not actually done”.

The wards, of course are fertile ground for bizarre terminology. Dr Nelson Lee, one of our editors collected a few commonly used descriptions/orders that he describes as “quite amusing”:

To discharge a patient from hospital, as written in the case notes: “Home”

To describe an out-patient follow up: “F.U.x3/12”

To describe a chubby patient: “obese”

To describe a man who drinks a bottle of beer over the weekend: “drinker”, “alcoholic”

To describe a confused or semi-comatose patient: “he does not obey command”

Clearly the younger generation of Hong Kong doctors has a strong puritanical streak, and we can look forward to ever more endearing medical terminology in the future!

**MARGARET HARRIS CHENG**