

EDITORIAL

Defining Words: Overactive Bladder

Words are the building blocks of language and the principal means by which we communicate with one another. Some words convey their meaning with uniform precision and understanding; others lead to confusion and controversy [Blaivas, 1982].

In 1879, James Murray, President of the English Philologic Society, signed a contract with the Oxford University Press to compile and edit a comprehensive English language dictionary. The contract called for a 6,400-page, four-volume work to be completed by 1889. Murray, a child prodigy, who at age 7 had begun to compare Greek, Latin, Chinese, and Hebrew editions of the Bible, became obsessed with this project. In 1885, he resigned from his teaching post in London and moved to Oxford where he devoted 80–90 hours a week to the project until his death in 1915 at age 78. The *Oxford English Dictionary* was finally completed in 1928 and consisted of 12 large volumes comprising 15,487 pages and 414,825 words [Winchester, 1998].

Philology is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the scientific study of languages and their development.” The scientific methodology employed to develop this dictionary is worth considering. Thousands of volunteer readers were assigned individual words to research. In a systematic way, each reader searched out his or her word in contemporary and ancient writings. Each time a word was identified in a text, a citation was generated that consisted of the word and the complete sentence in which it was used. The citation was written on a single slip of paper, filed, and categorized in a massive scriptorium in Murray’s garden. Murray and his associates meticulously read each citation and compiled all the possible definitions for each word, based on the way the words were actually used.

Now you all know what an overactive bladder is. It’s one that is too active. That means it functions too much. You all know exactly what that means—until we try to write it down and define it. No one, at the time of this writing, has come up with a definition of overactive bladder that is agreeable to all of us who can use that term. The reason for this is not so much that we disagree about what the word means; rather, it is because neither our language nor our measurement techniques are precise enough to satisfy a universal definition. Thus, just as it is not necessary to measure a 5-foot, 250-pound man to know that he is too fat, or to calculate your grandmother’s age to determine that she’s old enough to vote, it is not necessary to measure precisely a bladder to know that it’s overactive.

In the previous issue of this journal, a new format called “Sounding Board” was introduced. The purpose of this section is to allow ideas and opinions, unencumbered by the demands of strict peer review, to reach the readership to stimulate ideas, creativity, and debate. In that issue, Abrams and Wein [1999] made a plea for the

scientific community to “review definitions in lower urinary tract dysfunction and . . . (determine) whether there is a consensus in favor of redefining these terms.”

I think that there is a need to redefine terms, but first a word of caution. Even a scientific term, like bladder overactivity, can have more than one meaning. In common usage, an overactive bladder is characterized by urinary frequency because the bladder doesn't hold enough. It may not hold enough because it contracts involuntarily or because bladder filling causes pain or because there is low bladder compliance. However, none of these terms can be defined in a scientifically rigorous enough way to satisfy a single definition of normal and abnormal. Further, the scientific community cannot dictate how others use “our words.” We all know that sphincter incontinence is not what we mean by an overactive bladder, nor is polydipsia/polyuria. Nevertheless, the lay community often uses the term *overactive bladder* to describe all these conditions, and, I believe that we need such general terms. Of course, for scientific purposes, the terms we use must be as precise as possible. Until we learn to identify things precisely enough to accrue exact definitions, we'll have to use the words we have. It should be the responsibility of each scientist to define in the Methods section of his or her work, with as much precision as possible, exactly what he or she means when he or she uses a word. One simple example should suffice. The International Continence Society [Abrams et al., 1988] defines overactive detrusor function as “involuntary detrusor contractions during the filling phase,” yet there is lack of agreement about even the basic techniques for measuring and defining involuntary detrusor contractions. Thus, it is necessary for each individual investigator to state exactly how involuntary detrusor contraction is defined in his or her work.

Any definition must, then, include all the ways in which words are actually used, and perhaps these definitions should be compiled in exactly the same way that the *Oxford English Dictionary* was compiled. I hope that it will not take as long.

Jerry G. Blaivas, M.D.
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