

Computers & Terminology

by
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Recently I read an article in *The Economist* (Jun. 26, 1999) discussing how literal-minded computers are and how standard terminologies are having to be worked out in business and other areas to enable computerized searches for information. Computers are currently incapable of deciphering context. As Bill Gates says in *Business @ The Speed of Thought*, a query about the fastest computer chip on the market could easily produce information about the rapid delivery of fried potatoes. Likewise, a computer does not know that "contracts" and "legal agreements" may be the same thing. So if you search for the keyword "contracts," your computer will fail to return entries describing "legal agreements" even though those entries may contain valuable information which you need.

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), a non-profit group, has come up with an extension of HTML (hypertext markup language) used for creating Web pages. It is called XML (eXtensible Markup Language) and it provides a way of indexing data on the Web. It does this by appending metatags to Web sites describing their content. These metatags are then easily searchable as keywords. However, as *The Economist* states, "The only drawback is that, for XML to work properly, there has to be some agreements on definitions." In other words, such metatags or keywords have to be accepted as standards within particular professions or fields of interest. Because computerized searches via the Internet are becoming such an important source of information in our modern world, companies such as Microsoft are realizing the importance of standardizing terminology and are actively engaged in helping create these in several different fields. For instance, Microsoft has created *BizTalk* for standardizing business terminology on the Web.

As readers of this first issue of the Blue Poppy E-zine know, Blue Poppy has recently created an on-line searchable database of all our books, Research Reports, tapes, seminars, and Distance Learning programs keyworded by disease name. Now anyone can immediately determine which Blue Poppy products deal with a particular disease. In addition, Blue Poppy Press has recently signed contracts with two e-book (electronic book) publishers who will be selling digital versions of Blue Poppy books via the Internet and CD-ROM. As more and more information on acupuncture and Chinese medicine becomes digitized, the issue of standardization of professional terminology becomes ever more important. Unless this profession adopts such a standardized professional terminology, there can be no digital searches of electronic databases and cross-referencing of on-line materials.

For instance, yesterday, a student in California e-mailed me asking for information on the Chinese medical diagnosis and treatment of pediatric autism. I told her there was nothing specifically on this subject that I knew of either in English or Chinese. However, I told her that I felt that autism would probably be categorized as "withdrawal" in Chinese medicine.

Withdrawal is Wiseman's suggested translation of the term *dian* as in *dian kuang* withdrawal and mania. I am currently translating a book on Chinese medical psychiatry. In that book, there is no chapter titled autism. However, once one understands that autism is a type of withdrawal condition, than any information on withdrawal in that book, such as patterns and their treatment, becomes extremely germane to this student's research. But, if this student does not use the same terminology as English language writers and translators on withdrawal, then when this information eventually becomes available either on-line or in searchable CD-ROM form, this student will still not be able to find it.

As of this writing, I only know of a single, "freely available," professionally created, *already digitized* glossary of acupuncture and Chinese medical terms, and that is Nigel Wiseman's *English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*. This "dictionary" contains translations of more (as in many, many more) Chinese medical terms of any that I know *in any format*. While no one agrees with every one of Dr. Wiseman's terminological choices, using these as our professional standard makes ever increasing sense. After citing Dr. Wiseman's term as a standard reference or using it as a keyword or metatag, one can then go on to use any term they choose, thus having their cake and eating it too.

I have been advocating the adoption of Dr. Wiseman's terminology as our professional standard for a number of years for a number of reasons. These have included 1) precision of transmission of clinically important, technical information, 2) easier and more accurate cross-referencing of information from book to book, teacher to teacher, and school to school, and 3) the establishment of standards for peer review, third party payers, and governmental agencies. However, these arguments have mostly met with stony indifference at best to energetic opposition at worst. At a highly charged and highly partisan meeting several years ago, a committee was created by the national teachers association to create an alternative standard professional terminology. But, to date, where is it? No such alternative has been put forward by Dr. Wiseman's critics.

I believe we can no longer wait for other groups to get their act together. Dr. Wiseman's terminology already exists. It has English equivalents of thousands of Chinese medical terms and names as well as Chinese characters and Pinyin with tone marks *all already existing in digital form*. This was a huge piece of work in terms of financial commitment by author and publishers, personal passion and research, and hours upon hours of keystrokes, and I don't see *any* other group within our profession duplicating this endeavor any time soon. If Microsoft or some other e-entity wanted to purchase the digital rights to this standard terminology, they could post it on-line in a heartbeat.

If this profession cannot see the benefits of terminological standardization for any other reason than personal electronic access to clinically useful information, that alone should be enough to convince members of this profession that it is time to bite the bullet and accept Dr. Wiseman's terminology. Some people say that Dr. Wiseman's terms are hard to use and understand. True, they are a professional technical vocabulary that requires education to use and understand correctly. However, tests done independently by Blue Poppy Press and

Paradigm Publications confirm that readers unfamiliar with Chinese medicine have no harder time reading and understanding Dr. Wiseman's terms for the first time than the current etymologically incorrect hodge-podge of terms currently in use. That means that it is only laziness that stands in the way of the adoption of this terminology. If new students and patients have no problem with this terminology when presented with it right from the beginning, then it is only people who have become habituated to other terms that have a problem with it. As with any habit, it takes energy to change. However, are we going to let laziness debar us from some day (and some day soon) searching the Internet for information to help our patients who may be suffering from withdrawal, strangury, wasting thirst, mounting, liver depression, blood stasis, or spleen encumberment?

I began lobbying this profession for the adoption of Nigel Wiseman's terminology six or seven years ago, and, with each passing year, I only see more and more reasons to adopt it. Now the necessities of on-line searchability add yet another reason to this list.