

What's in a name?

Craig Hassed, MBBS, FRACGP, is Senior Lecturer, Department of General Practice, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria.

A notable and curious phenomenon in recent years has been the tendency to change the names of things. For example, the deaf or blind become the 'hearing or vision impaired'. An Aborigine is now an 'indigenous' person. In such cases one can understand the phenomenon as names sometimes need to be more accurate or descriptive. In other situations names can have negative connotations and in an endeavour to avoid such connotations we change the name, and in some cases one suspects the change of name is more about disguising something dubious to make it more acceptable. For example, in war the death of innocent civilians is sometimes described as 'collateral damage'. Although this type of catastrophe is probably unavoidable in modern warfare the modern term does tend to dehumanise and/or trivialise the actual event.

One name relevant to the practice of medicine and psychology which is less popular than it once was is that of 'patient'. Many doctors and counsellors do still call the people who come to see them 'patients', but in many situations patients have come to be known as 'clients', 'customers' or 'consumers'. Whether this name change is in the name of precision, to avoid negative connotations or is dubious, is an issue worth exploring.

What does it mean to be a patient?

Names are chosen because they represent something important and 'patient' is a case in point. It never ceases to amaze me

how one can miss the obvious, but not so long ago I can remember the first occasion that it really occurred to me that the name for patient was derived from that virtue we call 'patience'. To be patient is to 'bear or endure an evil with calmness and composure' or to be 'persistent, constant and unwearied in the face of difficulties.' To be a patient therefore is not merely to visit a doctor nor to be in need of help, but rather to be one who exhibits the qualities of patience, ie. 'one who suffers patiently'. The name is meant to remind any person meeting with a significant health problem of the innate qualities they will need to draw on in order to meet the adversity well. It says something about the state of mind in which a person can minimise suffering and is most conducive to recovery. Often, as an unexpected but welcomed side effect, it is also the attitude with which we are most likely to learn something about ourselves and the human condition.

Is there virtue in suffering?

'Sorrow and silence are strong, and patient endurance is godlike'.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,
Evangeline

One suspects that Longfellow is not necessarily recommending that we keep silent and don't communicate our needs but rather that we will find little profit in our suffering by merely complaining. A wiser form of silence which indicates resilience may well be demonstrating an ability to truly be with our adversity by

observing in a more centred or detached way. Whether Longfellow uses the term 'godlike' literally or figuratively one is not sure but it seems that he suggests there is exhibited a great majesty and strength in our humanity when we endure something well. The power to endure well should be seen as a different, but not mutually exclusive, quality to the ability to act well. Indeed, often when we find ourselves withholding action it is not patience but rather a sign of fear, confusion or procrastination. It would not be a very wise patient who did not see the doctor when they needed one, or did not act on sound advice when it was given. But whatever has to be endured while the situation or illness plays itself out, even if what has to be endured is a painful treatment or the effort which is required to change a situation, is best endured with an attitude of patience according to Ficino.

'Patience, indeed, leads you not to act but to suffer things to be...What is suffering well, other than not adding to the suffering occasioned by evils? But what do we mean by this? Nothing but a willingness to suffer what you have to suffer, even if you do not wish to. Unless you suffer willingly, you will certainly suffer unwillingly...O, the marvelous power of patience! The other virtues certainly battle against fate in one way or another, but it is patience alone...that conquers fate; for patience...changes what fate has decreed immutable and unavoidable, so that it makes the unavoidable voluntary. Just as he who acts badly turns what is good for him into evil, so he

who suffers well turns what is bad for him into good...He is tested and made bright by adversity'.

Marsilio Ficino,
The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, volume
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Such a concept, though it seems to confound our usual assumptions, is far from foreign to our experience. Consider those personal or clinical experiences such as all those courageous patients we have known who have turned a diagnosis of cancer or some other chronic illness from a tragedy to a source of inspiration for their friends, relations, carers or community. Often 'ordinary people' seem to do extraordinary things by being able to perform some sort of strange 'alchemy' by transmuting what could be a tragedy to a good.

How can this be? It may have something to do with the fact that life is full of lessons as if it is always seeking to teach us about ourselves and the world we live in. Lessons such as: 'everything is transitory' and, 'despite our desires we can't hold on to anything' or 'our dreams are no insurance policy against what life actually has in store for us' or 'pleasure and pain are a superficial measure of wellbeing'. It also seems as though we resist learning, or at least we need to be hit over the head by a very large stick before life gets our attention enough that the lesson is learned. It seems that the attentiveness which comes with acceptance and voluntariness actually allows us to finally see the lesson and in so doing to truly learn, not just in theory but in experience. The end result is that the harshest part of the burden seems to be lifted. Sometimes it almost feels like rather than fighting a wave which is larger than ourselves we finally learn to swim with it.

A patient by any other name?

Perhaps the original and uplifting meaning of patient has become lost as associations with helplessness or subservience to a paternalistic authority have

become superimposed over it. There may be some merit in this view if being a patient actually meant becoming helpless or disempowered. There is little virtue in such a state. In an endeavour to avoid these connotations other names seem to be superceding patient such as: 'client' or 'consumer' but these alternatives say nothing about the virtues needed for the role and risk the modern tendency to reduce everything to economic and business relationships. Clinicians often use the word 'client'. Corporations and governments are more likely to talk in terms of patients as 'consumers' and healthcare workers as 'providers' but can such an intimate relationship as the doctor-patient relationship really be commodified in such a way? Do these latter names really draw the right qualities out of doctors and patients? Rather than trading in the name patient for something else perhaps we need to remind ourselves what the name really means?

Each person will have to decide these questions for themselves but perhaps we should not make basic changes to our language unconsciously, unadvisedly or lightly. The effect might be more subtle and far reaching than we imagined or intended.

While we chew on these issues perhaps we could also chew over some words from Marcus Aurelius, the second century emperor and philosopher who had more than his fair share of adversity but seemed to know something about how to meet it well.

'Can a man call anything at all a misfortune, if it is not a contravention of his nature; and can it be a contravention of his nature if it is not against that nature's will? Well, then: you have learnt to know that will. Does this thing which has happened hinder you from being just, magnanimous, temperate, judicious, discreet, truthful, self respecting, independent, and all else by which a man's (or woman's) nature comes to its fulfillment? So here is a rule to remember in future, when anything tempts you to feel bitter: not 'This is a misfortune', but 'To bear this worthily is a good fortune'.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Reference

1. The Oxford Dictionary, London: Oxford University Press.

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