Medical Genealogy: Defining Obscure Medical Terms Used by Our Ancestors

Illnesses/Diseases

Apoplexy
Sudden impairment of neurological function, especially that resulting from a cerebral hemorrhage; a stroke. A sudden effusion of blood into an organ or tissue. A fit of extreme anger or rage.

• AKA: Poplexy, Napoplexie, Nepoplexie, Stroke

Boils
Ulcerous swelling, a hard inflamed suppurating tumour

• AKA: Ancome, Biles, Botch, Bule, Carbuncle, Froncle, Furuncle, Impostume, Imposthume, Knub, Kyle, Whitlow

Catarrh
The profuse discharge from nose and eyes which generally accompanies a cold or an inflammation of a mucous membrane; usually restricted to that of the nose, throat, and bronchial tubes, causing increased flow of mucus. i.e. the common cold

• AKA: Catarrh = a cold; Bronchial catarrh = bronchitis; Epidemic catarrh = influenza; Suffocative catarrh = croup; Summer catarrh or hay-asthma = hay fever, Coryza

Diphtheria
An infectious disease that is characterized by severe inflammation of mucous membranes, esp. of the throat but often also of the nose, larynx, trachea, and bronchi, with formation of a thick layer of a tough membrane sometimes causing obstruction to breathing. In the 19th century the disease was occasionally confused with scarlet fever and croup.

• AKA: Angina membranacea, Bladder in the throat, Boulogne sore throat, Cutaneous diphtheria, Diphtheritis, Laryngeal diphtheria, Malignant sore throat, Membranous croup, Milk-diphtheria, Putrid fever, Sore throat distemper – also used for quinsy, Ulcerated sore throat

Dropsy
A contraction for hydropsy. Swelling from an accumulation of fluid. Term is sometimes used for congestive heart failure.

• AKA: Abdominal dropsy = ascites; Anasarca or hyposarca = general fluid accumulation throughout the body; Brain dropsy = hydrocephalus; Cardiac dropsy = a symptom of disease of the heart; Chest dropsy = hydrothorax; Dropsie, dropcie, dropcy, dropesie, Edema, Oedema

Dysentery
An inflammatory disease of the large intestine, accompanied with griping pains, and mucous and bloody stools. Severe diarrhea. 2 Types -- amebic dysentery and bacillary dysentery

• AKA: Bloody flux, Cackerel, Contagious pyrexia (fever), Flux of blood, Frequent griping stools, Menison, Red flux
**Hernia**
Tumour formed by the displacement and resulting protrusion of a part of an organ through an aperture, natural or accidental, in the walls of its containing cavity. Started as a Greek slang term.
- AKA: Burstenness, Crepature, Inguinal, Incarceration, Gut-bursten, Rupture, Strangulation or Strangery

**Influenza**
An acute, highly infectious viral disease of humans, which typically occurs in seasonal (winter) outbreaks or as major epidemics or pandemics, is characterized by the sudden onset of fever and chills, headache, muscle pain, weakness, and cough, and can result in death. Pandemic form not seasonal, more virulent, more likely to kill the sufferer.
- AKA: Epidemic catarrh or catarrhal fever, Feveret, Flu, Grippe, Gripe, Grip, The grippe, La grippe, Le grippe (1775), St. Kilda cold = A variety of Influenza occurring in the Hebrides (1897), Spanish influenza (1918), Asian flu (1957), Mao flu or Hong Kong influenza (1968)

**Potter's asthma**
Lung disease caused by the dust created in the making of pottery. Term sometimes used for tuberculosis.
- AKA: Potter’s tuberculosis

**Piles**
Hemorrhoids

**Quinsy**
The profuse discharge from nose and eyes which generally accompanies a cold or an inflammation of a mucous membrane; usually restricted to that of the nose, throat, and bronchial tubes, causing increased flow of mucus. The common cold.
- AKA: Peritonsillar abscess, Quincy, Quinsied, Sore throat distemper – also used for diphtheria, Tonsillitis

**Stroke**
An apoplectic or (now more usually) paralytic seizure. Formerly “the stroke of God's hand.”
- AKA: Apoplexy, Cerebral embolism, Softening of the brain

**Syphilis**
A disease, transmitted mainly by sexual contact, which is characterized initially by the development of a chancre (ulcerated sore) on the skin or a mucous membrane, usually of the genitals, and later by systemic symptoms. In early use also: any of various other sexually transmitted diseases confused with this, including gonorrhoea and chancreid.
- AKA: Aleppo evil, Bad blood, Gore, Gout, Grandgore, Great pox or great pock, Grincom, French compliment, French disease, French evil, French goods, French marbles, French measles, French pox, King’s evil, Lues, Lues disease, Lues venera, Neapolitan, Neurosyphilis, Pox, Scabbado, Spanish pox, Syphilid, The foul evil, Venereal syphilis, Verol, verola

**Tuberculosis**
Disease characterized by the formation of tubercles (abnormal nodule on the surface of the body or in a part or organ) bacterial infection. Frequently with distinguishing word indicating the site or stage of infection, method of transmission, etc., most commonly affects the lungs and adjacent lymph nodes
- AKA: Consumption, Phthisis or Phthisis pulmonalis, Avian tuberculosis, Bovine tuberculosis, Inoculation tuberculosis, Miliary tuberculosis, Potter's asthma, White plague or White death, Abbreviated T.B.
Typhoid or Typhoid fever
Originally: any fever thought to resemble typhus or resulting in the typhoid state. In later use: spec. an acute infectious disease which is characterized by prolonged fever with headache, malaise, a transient rash of rose-coloured spots, abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, and (in late untreated cases) stupor or delirium. Confused with typhus due to similar sounding name.

- AKA: Camp diarrheaa, Enteric fever, Filth disease, Gastric fever, Laryngo-typhus, Paratyphoid, Pythogenic fever, Red River fever, Typh fever or typh poison

Typhus
An acute infectious disease freq. occurring in epidemics under conditions of overcrowding and poor hygiene, which is characterized by high fever, a red petechial rash spreading from the trunk to the extremities (rarely affecting the face), great physical debility, and often neurological abnormalities including delirium and stupor. Confused with typhoid fever due to similar sounding name.

- AKA: Names referring to the locations where epidemics occurred: Camp fever, Gaol fever, Hospital fever, Hungaric fever, Jail distemper, Jail fever, Military fever, Prison fever, Ship fever
- AKA Names referring to appearance of the rash or symptoms: Bilious fever, Brain fever, Laryngo-typhoid, Nervous fever, Pestilential fever, Petechial fever, Purple fever, Putrid fever, Spotted fever
- AKA Other names: Black death, Famine fever, Louse typhus, Malignant fever (in the 1850s), Palatine fever, Synochus, Tabardillo = endemic typhus fever of Mexico, Thanatotyphus, Typh fever or typh poison
Top 10 causes of death according to *How our ancestors died*, pg. 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1600s</th>
<th>1750s</th>
<th>1838</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plague</td>
<td>Convulsions</td>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Heart disease</td>
<td>Heart attack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>Stroke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>Fever of various kinds</td>
<td>Convulsions</td>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Lung cancer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscarriage, stillbirth, newborn baby</td>
<td>Smallpox</td>
<td>Typhus</td>
<td>Bronchitis</td>
<td>Other long-term lung diseases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Griping in the guts</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>Cancer of gut and liver</td>
<td>Influenza and pneumonia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convulsions</td>
<td>Teeth</td>
<td>Smallpox</td>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>Dementia</td>
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<td>Teeth and worms</td>
<td>Dropsy</td>
<td>Debility</td>
<td>Babies at or near birth</td>
<td>Breast cancer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aged and bedridden</td>
<td>Miscarriage, stillbirth</td>
<td>Dropsy</td>
<td>Senile dementia</td>
<td>Prostate cancer</td>
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<td>Dropsy</td>
<td>Asthma and coughs</td>
<td>Violence and accidents</td>
<td>Kidney and bladder disease</td>
<td>Urinary diseases</td>
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<td>Whooping cough</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>Heart failure</td>
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</table>
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Books available at Clayton Library

Coweta County Genealogical Society.
Clayton Library P298 COWET GA pg. 257-263

Drake, Paul, 1932-
Clayton Library 423.1 D762 USA V. 1 & 2

Drake, Paul, 1932-
Clayton Library 423.1 D762 USA

Evans, Barbara Jean.
Clayton Library 929.103 E92 USA 3ED

Jerger, Jeanette L.
Clayton Library 610.14 J55 USA

Wilbur, C. Keith, 1923-
Clayton Library 610.974 W666 USA

Wills, Simon.
Clayton Library 614.409 W741 USA
**Books available at other Houston Public Library Locations**

Oxford University Press.
HPL Central Reference 423 O98 2ED

HPL Central Reference 610.9 C174

Sell, Rebecca E.
HPL multiple locations 610.3 S467 6ED

Shiel, William C.
HPL Tuttle Library 610.3 W385 3ED

Stone, Jon R., 1959-
HPL Central 473.21 S878

**Digitized books available on the Internet**

Hooper, Robert.

Wain, Henry, 1907-.
[http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001556876](http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001556876)
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Websites

Archives & Rare Books Library, University of Cincinnati (Genealogy volunteers created this list of medical terms explaining what the late 19th century medical terms mean and how these translate into modern language usage.)
http://www.libraries.uc.edu/content/dam/libraries/arb/docs/local-government/medterms.pdf

Diseases on Scottish death certificates from 1855
http://www.scotlandsfamily.com/medical-diseases.htm

GenProxy -- Internet services for genealogists -- Medical
http://www.genproxy.co.uk/old_medical_terms.htm

McMaster University’s Antique and Obscure Words for Students in the History of Health and Medicine page
http://hsl.mcmaster.libguides.com/hhm/oldwords

Medilexicon free online Stedman’s Medical Dictionary
https://www.medilexicon.com/dictionary

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online
https://www.merriam-webster.com/

Nineteenth Century Diseases
http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~memigrat/diseases.html

Olive Tree Genealogy -- Glossary of Ancient Diseases
http://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/misc/disease.shtml

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Oxford English Dictionary
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