In recent years, great strides have been made in the field of medicine to lessen the terrors of illness. Curiously, however, one aspect of the struggle against disease has been overlooked almost entirely. We refer, of course, to the verbal aspect.

SMALLPOX is a frightening word. The disease it names is also known as VARIOLA. To the general public, VARIOLA is an unknown word, free of the sinister associations that condemn SMALLPOX to the linguistic limbo. Considered on its own merits, VARIOLA is a pleasant word. Related to “variation,” it carries mild mathematical and scientific associations. Ending with the letter A, typical of feminine first names, it suggests feminine qualities—softness, grace, beauty.

A comparatively easy way of reducing the dread that serious illness inspires in most people would be to substitute innocuous, pleasant names for the usual names of major diseases. To a great extent, this could be done without coining any new words, for suitable alternative names already exist for a great variety of sicknesses. In this article, we shall conduct an initial exploration into the problem, in the hope that at least some readers will carry our preliminary efforts forward to a successful conclusion.

Consider MEASLES, one of the most serious of childhood diseases. MEASLES is an ugly word. Why continue using it, when we have the option of replacing it either with BOVILLAE or with LADRÈRIE, both of them meaning exactly the same thing? The word BOVILLAE, suggesting “bovine,” brings in thoughts of placid, contented cows. Vaguely related to “bucolic,” it evokes thoughts of a pastoral, simple, unsophisticated life. The name LADRÈRIE may suggest LA-DI-DA, an interjection used to deride affected gentility, with a touch of lightness, most welcome when sickness strikes. LADRÈRIE may also suggest CAMARADERIE (good-fellowship) or DIABLERIE (mischief, deviltry). Any way you choose to look at it, there is simply no excuse to continue speaking of MEASLES.

Let us blunt the horror of LEPROSY. Here is an affliction which, like measles, is also known as LADRÈRIE. Better yet, we can call that illness ASTURIAN ROSE. Roses suggest love, beauty, and grace. The color “rose” reminds us of a rosy dawn, of a new and fresh beginning. The adjective “Asturian” refers to Asturia, an old province of Spain, bringing in thoughts of
Spanish romance and gallantry, as well as of travel to exotic, distant lands. On all counts, ASTURIAN ROSE is a very pleasant, cheerful name, infinitely preferable to the grimness and hopelessness of LEPROSY.

SYPHILIS is a dirty word. We are free to replace it with the euphemistic AVARIOSIS, which engenders some of the responses mentioned in connection with "variola," though the suffix -OSIS hints at evil. Still better is the name IRISH BUTTON. Ireland, the Emerald Isle, the Land of the Shamrock, has a most positive image in the minds of most of us. The term IRISH BUTTON sounds like a flower, since BACHELOR-BUTTON, COCKLE BUTTON, and CUCKOO-BUTTON are all flower names. With a stroke of the word, we have eliminated the scourgé of SYPHILIS!

The gravity of WHOOPING COUGH can skilfully be disguised by referring to it as COQUELUCHE. The word is a French one, meaning "the rage, darling, favorite, reigning fancy." The mere fact that the word is French gives it an aura of fashion and of glamor. The two halves of the word transmit such ideas as "cock of the roost" and "light," clearly positive thoughts. With a word like COQUELUCHE around, let us abandon WHOOPING COUGH forever! Incidentally, this is another of those double-duty words, workhorses of our language, for it is also a description of INFLUENZA, an equally objectionable malady.

We have already abolished the horror of CHOLERA in our verbal crusade, by redesignating it as INDOLEMIA. Here is a term that makes one think of indolence, the disposition to avoid exertion. With INDOLEMIA, we envision lazy, dreaming days on the seashore. We are savoring life to its fullest with INDOLEMIA. The name makes you want it, doesn't it?

The curse of EPILEPSY is another thing of the past. Henceforth, we shall call it FAUNORUM LUDIBRIA, a Latin phrase meaning "the sport of the fauns." Since fauns were rural deities in classical mythology, delightful woodland scenes rise up before us as we meditate on FAUNORUM LUDIBRIA. Again, there is a second side to this name, for it also refers to NIGHTMARE.

YELLOW FEVER is an acute infectious disease, frequently fatal. You need no longer— we have replaced it with AMARYLISM. What does that name suggest? The AMARYLLIS, a flower with lilylike, usually rose-colored blossoms. AMARYLLIS is also a name for a shepherdess or country girl in classical and later pastoral poetry. Once again, we have covered the sordid facts about a dire illness with a cloak of rosy, rustic pleasantness.

ASTURIAN ROSE has already been mentioned in connection with leprosy. We now introduce it as an equally apt designation of PELLagra. A serious ailment involving skin changes, diarrhea, and severe nervous dysfunction. As applied to PELLagra, there is even a choice between the English form, ASTURIAN ROSE, and the Latin form, ROSA ASTURIICA or ROSA ASTURIENSIS. Whatever the form used, it's simply delightful. Moreover, there is a further alternative: we can refer to the disease as MAYIDISM. This suggests MAY DAY, with its festivities, including the crowning of the May queen and dancing around the Maypole. More generally, MAYIDISM reminds us of the merry month of MAY, of springtime, of the rejuvenating forces of Mother Nature at work.
With DIPHTHERIA, we are enabled to return to the world of high fashion, of society, of elegance: that disease, you see, is also designated as CYNANCHE, a term that slight-rhymes with CARTE BLANCHE and is "obviously" French. An additional advantage in using the name CYNANCHE is that it may also be applied to more common afflictions, such as TONSILLITIS, SORE THROAT, and CROUP. Fortune has smiled on us once more.

The thought of JAUNDICE, normally, is a sickening one. We have surmounted this particular problem by switching to another name for the illness, AURIGO. We could have chosen a variety of names for JAUNDICE, including CHOLEPLANIA, FLAVEDO, and ICTERUS, but each of these is colorless, whereas AURIGO indicates GOLD, both in substance and in color. More than that, our name for JAUNDICE, by its association with the constellation AURIGA, points us toward the heavens. In short, AURIGO is a golden, a divine, name!

Don't let our pioneering effort wither on the vine. Continue the good work, until every ailment known to man has been conquered in like manner.

Flexible tool that it is, language may also be used to produce precisely the opposite effect, and we caution you to avoid the pitfalls involved in this exercise. A few examples of what may happen if you don't watch out: GOUT can be referred to as DOMINUS MORBORUM, implying all that is morbid and gloomy, diseased and gruesome; YELLOW FEVER may be called VOMITO NEGRO, a name on which we need not expatiate; the common COLD is also known as GRAVEDO, a reminder of the cold, cold grave; and MEASLES have masqueraded under the title of MORBILLI, returning us to the morbid, the unwholesome, the grisly.

Lest anyone doubt the authenticity of our pronouncements, we hasten to mention that all names of illnesses given here were taken from Gould's Medical Dictionary, Fifth Revised Edition, edited by C. V. Brownlow and Staff, published by The Blakiston Company, Philadelphia and Toronto, 1941.

PILING UP PREPOSITIONS

Some pedantic grammarians object to ending a sentence with a preposition. Since others condone the practice, it has become fashionable to end sentences with a whole string of them. Mr. Darryl H. Francis, of Hounslow, Middlesex, England, has tied the world record for sentences of that sort with one that ends in 9 consecutive prepositions. Let us explain.

A few years ago, a British pop group called “The Yardbirds” released a disc entitled, “Over, Under, Sideways, Down.” Assuming that the record was exported to Australia and then brought back by someone, it might be asked, “What did he bring ‘Over, Under, Sideways, Down’ up from Down Under for?” If we analyze the words in this sentence singly rather than in groups, and recognize that sideways is a preposition in spirit just as much as its mates in the song title, then the last 9 words of the sentence are prepositions.

Can you do better?

WORD WAYS