

WHY CAN'T DOCTORS SPELL?

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The illegibility of doctors' handwriting has spawned innumerable jokes. Jottings that seem illegible and unintelligible may actually be technical terms that mimic commoner words. A cursory scan of Stedman's Medical Dictionary (1976) uncovered scores of seemingly-misspelled words. An abridged collection of these is given below, where each scientific term is followed by a brief definition, with its common look-alike in parentheses.

ABROSIA starvation (ambrosia)
 ACOLOGY therapeutics (ecology)
 ANERGY absence of sensitivity reactions (energy)
 APATITE calcium fluoride phosphate (appetite)
 AXION brain and spinal cord (axiom)

BHANG powdered Cannabis (bang)
 BARBIERS beriberi (barbers)
BASION point on the foramen magnum (bastion, basin)
 BOLDO evergreen leaves for liver disturbances (bold)
 BUCCAL relating to the cheek (buckle)

CALICES subdivisions of the renal pelvis (calluses)
 CALVITIES baldness (cavities)
 CARIOUS afflicted with dental cavities (curious)
 CAVITIS celophlebitis (cavities)
 CHYME partially digested food (chime)

CLUNES buttocks (clones, clues)
 CCMEDO a blackhead (comedy)
 CEREBRATION process of reasoning (celebration)
 CUBEB West Indian fruit (cubed)
 CUTCH heart wood extract, for diarrhea (catch, clutch)

DECLIVE portion of the cerebellum (decline)
 DELIGATION ligation (delegation)
 DESMON complement-fixing antibody (demon)
 DIASTER double star figure in mitosis (disaster)
 EDEA external genitalia (idea)

EDUCTION emerging from anesthesia (education)
 EMPHRATIC relating to an impaction (emphatic)
 EPITHEM external application, like a poultice (epithet)
 ERASION scraping away of bone (erosion)
 ERGINE lysergic acid amide (engine)

ESTIVAL occurring in the summer (festival)
 FANGO therapeutic mud from Italian springs (fangs, tango)
 FASCIAL relating to tissue sheets under the skin (facial)

FEL bile (fell)
 FLEAM a lancet (flea, flame)
 FORMICATION sensation of ants creeping on one's skin (fornication)
 FORMOL formolin (formal)
 FRIT material for glaze of artificial teeth (fruit)
 FUNDUS lowest part of a sac (fungus, funds)
 GAVAGE feeding by stomach tube (garage, savage)
 GENAL relating to the cheek (genial)
 GRAVIDITY number of pregnancies (gravity)
 GUTTUR throat (gutter)
 HAPTEN partial antigen (happen)
 HILI organ parts where nerves enter and leave (hill)
 HISTIONIC pertaining to any tissue (histrionic)
 HORISMASCOPE a U-shaped test tube (horoscope)
 HUMERUS an arm bone (humorous)
 HUMIN insoluble brown residue from hydrolysis (human)
 HYGRINE alkaloid derived from coca leaves (hygiene)
 HYPINOSIS diminished coagulability of the blood (hypnosis)
 IMPATENT not patent, dark (impatient, impotent)
 INCLUDES plural of incus, small bone in the middle ear (includes)
 INION external occipital protuberance (onion, union)
 INSOLATION exposure to sunlight (insulation)
 INUNCTION anointing (injunction)
 IRIN a lipid-soluble acid (iron)
 IRONE a cyclic ketone, responsible for violets' odor (iron)
 KOSIN vermifuge, obtained from *Hagenia abyssinica* (cousin)
 LABILITY instability (liability, ability)
 LIVOR a discoloration (liver)
 LUES syphilis (lies, blues, glues)
 LUMBAR pertaining to the loins (lumber)
 LURAL pertaining to the termination of the infundibulum (plural)
 MALA cheek (male)
 MANDRIN stiff wire inserted in a catheter (mandarin)
 MASSICOT lead monoxide (mascot)
 MATRASS a long-necked glass vessel (mattress)
 MEATUS the external opening of a canal (meats)
 MEATAL pertaining to the meatus (mental, metal)
 METAPORE an aperture of the fourth ventricle (metaphor)
 MILIARY resembling a millet seed in size (military)
 MOLAL denoting one mol of solute (moral, molar)
 MONOSE monosaccharide (morose)
 MORSAL denoting the masticatory surface of a tooth (morsel)
 MORULATION formation of the embryonic morula (modulation)
 MUCIC an organic acid (music)
 MYTACISM stammering with the letter M substituted (mysticism)
 NASION skull point at the nasofrontal suture (nation)
 NATES buttocks (mates, rates)
 NATRON hydrous sodium carbonate (matron, nation)
 NEPHROID resembling a kidney (Negroid)

NESTIS abstinence from food (nests)
 NOTALGIA a pain in the back (nostalgia)
 NUTATION act of nodding, especially involuntary (notation)
 OBEX point on the medulla oblongata (ibex)
 OMENTUM the membrane enclosing the bowels (momentum)
 OMENTAL pertaining to the omentum (mental)
 ORCHIL a violet dye from lichens (orchid)
 ORGANICIST adherent of the theory of organicism (organist)
 OROTATE salt or ester of orotic acid (rotate)
 OROTIC 6-carboxylic acid (erotic)
 OSMOLOGY study of odors (cosmology)
 OSTALGIA pain in a bone (nostalgia)
 PANIS bread (penis, panic)
 PANTONINE an amino acid in *E. coli* (pantomine)
 PARAPARETIC someone with slight paralysis (peripatetic)
 PAVOR fear, terror (favor)
 PELTA silver-staining, membranous organelle (pelts, delta)
 PERIOTIC surrounding the inner ear (periodic)
 PILAR covered with hair (pillar)
 PILARY covered with hair (pillory)
 PILI hairs (pill, pile)
 PILLION temporary artificial leg (billion)
 PLANTAR relating to the sole of the foot (planter)
 PLASTID a structure in plant cytoplasm (plastic)
 PLEDGET a tuft of wool, cotton or lint (pledges)
 PLEURAL relating to the membrane surrounding the lungs (plural)
 POMPHUS a wheal or blister (pompous)
 POPLES ham of the knee (peoples)
 PORION craniometric point (portion)
 PREGNANE parent hydrocarbon of two series of steroids (pregnant)
 PREMUNITION infection immunity (premonition)
 PROBANG a slender, flexible rod (probing)
 PROSECTOR one who prepares material for dissections (prospector)
 PROTENSITY time attribute of a mental process (propensity)
 PYKNIC of short, stocky built (picnic)
 QUITTOR a fistulous tract in an injured horse (quitter)
 REFLUX a backward flow (reflex)
 RISUS a laugh (rises)
 RUBER red (rubber)
 SACRAD toward the pelvic sacral bone (sacred)
 SALIT salicylic-acid ester of borneol for gout (salt, split)
 SARCOTIC causing an increase in flesh (narcotic)
 SCRAPIE a disease in sheep and goats (scrape)
 SELLAR relating to a cranial sella turgica (seller, cellar)
 SPLENOID resembling the spleen (splendid)
 SPRUE primary intestinal malabsorption (spruce, spree)
 STAPEDES plural of stapes, auditory small bone (stampedes)
 STOMACACE canker sores in the mouth (stomach-ache)
 STYPE a tampon (type)

SUCCUSSION shaking, as a diagnostic procedure (succession)
 SUDATION sweating (sedation)
 SWAGE to fuse suture thread to a needle (sewage, wage)
 SYCOSIS inflammation of facial hair follicles (psychosis)
 TACTOR organ of touch (tractor, factor)
 TERPIN a cyclic terpene alcohol (terrapin)
 TETTER eruption, as in ringworm or eczema (teeter, totter, letter)
 TESIS child-bearing (taxis)
 THESAURUSIS abnormal body storage of foreign objects (thesauruses)
 TIQUEUR one suffering from a tic (liqueur)
 TORMEN severe colic (torment)
 TORMINAL pertaining to tormen (terminal)
 TRANSFORMATION perforation of a fetal skull base (transformation)
 TROPHESES results of a trophic nerve disorder (prophecy)
 TRYPTIC relating to tryptin (cryptic, triptych)
 TUBBA foot yaws (tuba)
 TUSSAL relating to a cough (tussle)
 TYLE a callus (tile, type)
 UBERTY fruitfulness (puberty)
 UNCAL relating to a hook-shaped body (uncle)
 UREA carbamide (area)
 VACUOME a system of vacuoles (vacuum)
 VASAL relating to an anatomic duct (vassal, basal)
 VENENATION poisoning (veneration)
 WHEAL acute area of skin edema (wheel)

There are several classes of medical words that automatically look misspelled. One class is words ending in -AD, a suffix meaning "toward". Such pseudo-misspellings include CENTRAD, FORMAD, NEURAD, ORAD, RADIAD, TERMINAD. Another class is chemical substances that end in -IN, such as ARABIN, BLASTIN, DIGIN, EMULSIN, GALLEIN, INHIBIN, LININ, PYRAMIN, SKIMMIN, SYMPATHIN. Further pseudo-misspellings arise from the use of Latin terms in medicalese. Stedman's dictionary includes hundreds of terms ending in -IO, such as ABLATIO, ACCRETIO, ACTIO and ADHESIO, as well as scores of terms ending in -ANS or -ENS, such as ABERRANS, ACCLERANS, ACCIDENS, and CONFLUENS, or -AS words such as ANXIETAS, EXTREMITAS, and GRAVITAS.

Of course, there are many pseudo-misspellings not involving medical words; Webster's yields specimens such as BLASTID, BOMBINATION, FASCIATION, ORCHESTIA, PORRECT, PRAISSES, RICTAL and TECNOLOGY. So, don't let the strange combinations of tletters lead you to sycosis. Your blastid doctors may be using the porrect nutation of their tecnology. After all, they're only humin!