

## In reply

The National Library of Medicine (NLM) welcomes and values comments about how to improve the terminology and scope notes (definitions) in the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), which are used to index articles for MEDLINE. Users of MEDLINE are invited to submit such comments to the electronic MeSH suggestion box (see <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/meshsugg.html>). The scope notes were originally developed as an aid to indexers, to help them understand when a specific heading would be appropriate. With the advent of free MEDLINE and the MeSH browser in the past six years, MeSH terms and scope notes have been subject to greater public scrutiny, which has assisted NLM in

identifying obsolete, antiquated or confusing information.

NLM concurs that the current MeSH terms for racial and ethnic groups are outmoded. In response to previously received comments about these terms and their scope notes, substantial revisions have been undertaken for the 2004 edition of MeSH. The separation of racial and ethnic groups in different hierarchies will be abolished, and indexing practices will be revised. New terminology and scope notes have been written and are currently undergoing internal review at NLM.

A larger and deeper question is the appropriateness of representing racial identities in an era when much more specific genetic information is becoming available.

Race is an unscientific concept. Nonetheless, even a cursory review of current literature shows that studies in which groups are described by implied or explicit racial characteristics continue to be published and to contribute to a deeper understanding of human biology. We hope that the revised treatment of racial and ethnic groups in the 2004 edition of MeSH will remove offensive terminology but still allow indexers to describe topics that are discussed in the literature indexed in MEDLINE.

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