

A disease—or gene—by any other name would cause a stink

Biomedically speaking, what's in a name? A lot, as it turns out. In August, an international team working in India unveiled their discovery of a gene encoding an enzyme that confers resistance to a broad range of antibiotics among a family of pathogenic bacteria (*Lancet Infect. Dis.* 10, 597–602, 2010). There was widespread consternation that a new superbug was going to lead to incurable infections across the globe, and an equal amount of distress was voiced by the Indian government over the scientists' decision to call the encoded protein 'New Delhi metallo- β -lactamase-1' (NDM-1), in honor of the city where the enzyme was first identified. Members of the Indian Parliament denounced the name choice as "malicious propaganda," according to news reports, and the Indian health ministry disputed the scientists' assertion that the gene variant originated in India and Pakistan.

But NDM-1 isn't the first biomedical term to attract geopolitical controversy. Below are a few other naming disputes.

Roxanne Palmer

Syphilis

One of the earliest dustups over medical nomenclature was associated with this sexually transmitted disease. Known as "the French disease" to the Italians and "the Italian disease" to the French, syphilis eventually acquired its current name thanks to a poem written in 1530 by an Italian doctor named Girolamo Fracastoro. The name is shared by the main character of the poem, a shepherd who is afflicted with the disease by the god Apollo as punishment after he cursed the sun.



Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever

Usually, nomenclature is decided with preference given to whoever publishes first. But in the case of this tick-borne illness, political pressure from the USSR forced the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) to an unusual compromise.



Although Soviet scientists were the first to identify the condition in 1944 on the northern coast of the Black Sea, they did not isolate the virus responsible for the disease until 1967. However, a group of scientists working in central Africa discovered the virus in 1956. At first, the ICTV suggested the compromise of "Congo-Crimean hemorrhagic fever," but the USSR stood firm and was ceded priority in 1973.

Swine flu

The colloquial name for the most recent pandemic strain of H1N1 attracted a minor controversy when, in April 2009, Israel's deputy health minister Yakov Litzman proposed changing the virus's name to remove the porcine reference, which he deemed offensive to Jews and Muslims, who regard pigs as unclean. Litzman proposed the name "Mexican flu" to reflect the first recorded outbreak of the disease, which appeared in the southern Mexican state of Veracruz. Mexico's ambassador to Israel immediately voiced an official complaint, and Israel hastily rushed to emphasize they were never seriously endorsing the name change.

Spanish flu

The strain responsible for the 1918 influenza pandemic did not actually originate in Spain, nor did it hit Spain disproportionately hard. Censorship of newspapers during World War I hushed up much of the



coverage of the disease's ravages on both sides of the conflict, but Spain, a neutral country, had no such restrictions. So the virus that Spaniards referred to at the time as "the French flu" got blamed on the Iberian nation. Various sources have since narrowed down the virus's origin to either Kansas or China.



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