

Medical Terms in the 18th and 19th Century

Finding a death certificate with a term we have never heard before can be frustrating and mean a trip to the computer to find the meaning of the term. The following terms are taken from Craig Thornber's articles on the History of Medicine at www.thornber.net and also given by Jo Ann Given VBGS Member. There are many more terms on his web site and articles on general medical practices in the 18th and 19th centuries in England.

Abortus fever: Brucellosis, a disease caught from cattle via milk resulting in a fever.

Ague: malarial infection characterized by paroxysms (stages of chills, fever, and sweating at regularly recurring times) and followed by an interval or intermission of varying duration

Anascara: generalized dropsy. See dropsy.

Aphonia: laryngitis

Apoplexy: paralysis caused by stroke.

Bad Blood: see syphilis

Biliousness: nausea, abdominal pains, headache, and constipation. Also jaundice associated with liver disease

Black Death or Black plague: bubonic plague, an infectious fever caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* transmitted by the rat flea

Black Jaundice: Weil's disease, a bacterial infection of the liver carried by rats, which can affect farmers and sewage workers

Bloody flux: blood in the stools, see dysentery

Bright's Disease: Glomerulonephritis (kidney inflammation)

Bursten: hernia or rupture.

Cachexy: also, cachexia, a wasting syndrome.

Camp fever: see typhus.

Cancrum otis: an erosive ulcer of the cheek and lip resulting from poor hygiene. It was often seen in young children and could be fatal as it led to gangrene of the facial tissues

Canine madness: rabies or hydrophobia

Cataplasm: a poultice

Child bed fever: also, known as puerperal fever is a form of septicemia caused by lack of hygiene during the delivery of a baby

Chin cough: whooping cough or tussis convulsiva, mainly a disease of childhood associated with a strange sounding cough which often brings on vomiting. Synonyms: ching cough, pertussis, tussis convulsiva

Cholera: an acute, infectious disease caused by *Vibrio comma*, characterized by profuse diarrhea, vomiting, and cramps. Cholera is spread by faeces-contaminated water and food

Chorea: a disease of the nervous system, characterized by jerky movements chiefly of the face and extremities. Synonym: Saint Vitus' Dance

Colic: abdominal pain and cramp

Consumption: a wasting away of the body; formerly applied especially to pulmonary tuberculosis, caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Synonyms: marasmus (in the mid-nineteenth century), phthisis

Corruption: infection

Coryza: a cold. See also catarrh

Costiveness: constipation

Cramp colic: appendicitis

Creeping paralysis: a term that encompasses multiple sclerosis

Croup: a spasmodic laryngitis seen mainly in children and associated with a cough and difficulties in breathing.

Cynanche maligna: putrid sore throat

Cynanche parotidæa: mumps

Debility: abnormal bodily weakness or feebleness; decay of strength

Dropsy: a swelling caused by accumulation of abnormally large amounts of fluid. Caused by kidney disease or congestive heart failure

Dysentery: inflammation of the intestine

Eclampsia: a form of toxemia accompanying pregnancy

Effluvia: exhalations. In the mid-19th century, they were called "vapors"

Enteric fever: see typhoid fever

Epilepsy: a disorder of the nervous system, with either mild and occasional loss of attention or sleepiness (petit mal) or by severe convulsions with loss of consciousness (grand mal)

Erysipelas: a feverish disease characterized by intense deep red local inflammation of the skin caused by *Streptococcus* bacterium. Synonyms: Rose, Saint Anthony's Fire

Falling sickness: epilepsy

Fistula: a sinous ulcer within

Furuncle: see boil

French Pox: venereal disease, former name of syphilis

G.P.I: general paralysis of the insane. The third and final stage of syphilis which may not occur until many years after the primary phase

Gathering: an accumulation of pus

Gleet: see catarrh

Glossitis: inflammation of the tongue

Goitre: swelling of the thyroid caused by shortage of iodine in the diet
Also, known as Derbyshire neck

Gout: an arthritic disease marked by recurrent acute attacks of pain, tenderness, redness, and swelling around the joints and tendons caused by deposits of monosodium urate crystals

Gravel: a disease characterized by small stones which are formed in the kidneys, passed along the ureters to the bladder, and expelled with the urine. See also stranguary. Synonym: kidney stone

Great pox: see syphilis

Grippe: influenza, also La Grippe or grip

Haemoptysis: spitting blood

Headmouldshot: this is when the sutures of the skull, generally the coronal, ride: that is, have their edges shot over one another; which is frequent in infants and occasions convulsions and death

Hip gout: osteomyelitis

Hospital fever: see typhus

Hydrothorax: congestion of the lungs, see also dropsy

Hysteritis: inflammation of the womb

Imposthume: a collection of purulent matter in a bag or cyst

Inanition: decline from inadequate nourishment; starvation

Indican in the Urine: poisonous material being thrown back into the system

Infantile Debility: see marasmus

Infantile Spinal Paralysis: polio

Idrosis: greatly increased perspiration

Jail fever: see typhus

Kings evil: scrofula, a tubercular infection of the throat lymph glands. The name originated in the time of Edward the Confessor, with the belief that the disease could be cured by the touch of the king of England

La Grippe: influenza

Lead Palsy: a sequel to Painter's colic; muscles of the forearm are palsied from lead in the body

Lead poisoning: This was common in the 18th and 19th centuries for two reasons; workers were exposed to lead in pottery glazes and paints or other industries extracting or using the metal. In addition some lead salts were used in medicine before the dangers were appreciated

Livergrown: having a great liver. (Possibly as a result of high alcohol consumption!)

Locomotor ataxia: A movement disorder caused by syphilitic infection of the spinal cord

Lues: see syphilis

Lues venera: venereal disease

Lumbago: rheumatic pain in the back

Lunatic: mad, having the imagination influenced by the moon

Lung Fever: see pneumonia

Lung Sickness: tuberculosis, see consumption

Lupus erythematosus: a chronic disease causing degeneration of connective tissue

Lying In: Refers to the period around childbirth

Malignant sore throat: diphtheria

Malignant fever: see typhus

Marasmus: progressive emaciation caused by malnutrition in young children.

Membranous Croup: hoarse cough, diphtheria.

Miasma: "poisonous vapours" (bad smells) that were believed to spread infection

Milk Crust: small red, itchy pimples on the face or scalp of infants or children which burst and exude sticky fluid forming a yellow crust

Miliary Fever: small pustules or vesicles on the skin, so called as they resemble millet seed

Milk fever: from drinking infected milk, such as undulant fever or brucellosis

Milk Leg: thrombosis of veins in the legs caused by lying in bed too long after childbirth. It leads to ulceration of the skin. Synonym: white leg, phlegmasia alba dolens

Milk Sickness: also known as **tremetol vomiting** or, in animals, as **trembles**, is a kind of poisoning, characterized by trembling, vomiting, and severe intestinal pain, that affects individuals who ingest milk, other dairy products, or meat from a cow that has fed

on white snakeroot plant, which contains the poison tremetol

Mormal: gangrene

Mortification: complete death of a part of the body changing it to a black, stinking mass

Naples disease: another name for syphilis.

Natural decay: death through old age is frequently shown on death certificates as natural decay

Osmidrosis: perspiration with a peculiar smell

Painter's Colic: also known as Devonshire colic or dry belly-ache; a form of colic experienced with slow lead poisoning

Palsy: a privation of motion or feeling or both, proceeding from some cause below the cerebellum, joined with a coldness, flaccidity, and at last wasting of the parts

Pellagra: a disease caused by eating spoiled maize; Symptoms begin with vomiting and diarrhea followed by a swollen and sore tongue and a red, ulcerated mouth, rash on the body, and body sores

Pessary: a device worn in the vagina for birth control or to give support to a displace uterus

Phisic: medicine

Phlebitis: tenderness or hardness of an infected vein; treatment with leeches or lotions

Phthisis: see consumption

Piles: hemorrhoids

Pink disease: disease in children caused by mercury poisoning from the use of mercury salts in teething powders

Pleurisy: inflammation and mucus in the lungs

Potters' asthma: Workers in the pottery industry of Staffordshire were exposed to dust from dried clay and in some cases from ground flints and bone used as clay additives. They developed an inflammation of the lung similar to that of miners with silicosis

Potts disease: tuberculosis of the spine leading to degeneration of the vertebrae

Pox: syphilis

Purples: spots of a livid color, which break out in malignant fevers.

Putrid fever: diphtheria

Putrid sore throat: ulceration of an acute form, attacking the tonsils, see also Quinsy

Pyemia: a form of blood poisoning from pus in the blood carried to various parts of the body

Quinsy: an acute inflammation of the soft palate around the tonsils, often leading to an abscess

Remitting fever: malaria also called the ague

Rheumatism: inflammation of the joints

Rising of the Lights: croup - any obstructive condition of the larynx or trachea (windpipe), characterized by a hoarse, barking cough and difficult breathing, occurring chiefly in infants and children.

Rose-Rash: "false measles" or roseola

Saint Vitus's Dance: chorea; nervous disorder which creates involuntary muscular contractions

Scarlatina: Scarlet Fever, a contagious disease caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus pyogenes*

Sciatica: painful condition in the hip and or thigh

Screws: rheumatism

Scrofula: tuberculosis of the lymphatic glands, especially those in the neck. A disease of children and young adults. See also **King's Evil**.

Scurvy: vitamin C deficiency disease, common on long voyages and characterized by softening of the gums, haemorrhages under the skin and general debility

Self-Follution: masturbation

Ship fever: see **Typhus Fever**

Small-pox: an eruptive distemper of great malignity. Also, known as variola

Softening of The Brain: senility or general paralysis of the insane (GPI) which is tertiary syphilis. Also, used for cerebral haemorrhage/stroke.

Splenitis: inflammation of the spleen

Spotted fever: Cerebro-Spinal Meningitis

St. Anthony's Fire: see erysipelas

St. Vitus Dance: a twitching of the limbs consequent on streptococcal infections also known as chorea Sancti Viti

Stranguary: restricted urine flow

Strophulus: prickly heat

Summer complaint of Infants: see cholera infantum also dysentery or baby diarrhea caused by spoiled milk

Suppurating: producing pus

Synochus: fever

Syphilis: long lasting contagious venereal disease caused by bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, characterized by three stages, primary, secondary and tertiary

Trench fever: a louse borne infection characterized by headaches, inflamed eyes, skin rashes and pains in the legs. The infective agent is *Rickettsia quintana*

Typhus: An acute, infectious disease caused by the parasite *Rickettsia prowazekii*, transmitted by lice and fleas

Undulant fever: brucellosis, an infectious fever contracted from contaminated milk

Uremia: blood in the urine

Water-Brash: pyrosis; similar to heartburn; belching of a thin, watery fluid

White leg: see milk leg

Wind Colic: also known as interalgia or flatulent colic; distressing pain in the bowels

Winter Fever: see pneumonia

Wool sorters' disease: anthrax, a disease formerly found in farm animals that could be transmitted to man. Now rare in developed countries but common in central Asia

Worm fever: may have been used to indicate a fever or enteritis during which worms were passed in the faeces. It is given as a cause of death of children in the early 19th century

Yellow Jack or Yellow Fever: also known as Bronze John; Infectious tropical disease transmitted by a yellow fever mosquito