

Latin as the language of Medicine - historical survey

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About 500–400 years before the Christian Era, the language of medicine was born in Ancient Greece along with the progress of the Western medical art. In the second century BC, the Romans conquered the Greek peninsula, while the regions in the Italian peninsula where Latin was spoken were conquered by Greek medicine. As the Latin language grew more and more important, it needed a medical vocabulary of its own. The basic work was done by the Gallian Roman scholar, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who in the first century AD, laid down the outlines for the Latin medical vocabulary.

Greek was the dominant language of medicine in the Roman Empire until the fourth century AD. Along with the expansion of the Empire, Latin gradually began to be used as the common medical language of Western Europe. This development, however, was retarded by wars and various upheavals, so that it was not until the first few centuries of the second millennium when Latin established itself as the language of medicine. A large number of medical books were then translated from Greek and Arabic into Latin, which at that time, under the influence of the Catholic Church and the universities, was becoming the common language of the Western civilisation.

The Greek-based Latin vocabulary was preserved in the names of diseases, operations, medical herbs and special fields of medicine, whereas new constructions, actions and phenomena in the fields of anatomy, physiology and pathology were usually given names which were based on the original Latin vocabulary. From the fifteenth century onwards, the significance of the Latin language was emphasised through internationalisation and the development of the art of printing. Since then the

development of national languages was getting stronger, which was also reflected in medical vocabularies. Consequently, the standardisation of the nomenclature became necessary. This was first carried out in books dealing with medicinal plants as well as in various lists of medicines or pharmacopoeias.

Since the late 18th century, Latin as the language of universities, books and other publications gradually began to be replaced by the national languages. In Finland, the academic medical dissertations were written in Latin till 1828. According to an order given that year, doctoral theses could, from then on, be alternatively written in Swedish and, from 1858 on, also in Finnish.

More than a half of the modern medical terminology dates from the period of the past one hundred years. Thanks to the cooperation of scientists and linguistic experts, a majority of the recently given names follow the ancient Greco-Latin vocabulary both in form and in spirit. However, the number of words which have been modified from the vocabulary of national languages, science and technology as well as from eponyms or acronyms, is increasing. Due to the criteria of categorising and digital recording of the terminology, verbal terms have been changed into codes consisting of letters and numbers, which, at the push of a button, can be output in Finnish, Latin or in both languages.

In medical practice, the Latin background has been best preserved in anatomical studies, in the diagnoses of case histories and medical reports, in some forms of recipes and in so-called “doctor’s Latin” or hospital slang. As far as modern languages are concerned, especially the English language has maintained its Latin tradition to a considerable degree.