

## On development of medical terminology

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On historical grounds, the scientific terminology of medicine is mainly (c. 93%) based on Latin and Greek, of which c. 46% comes from Greek and a slightly higher proportion, c. 47%, from Latin. This vocabulary includes, for example, ancient words of everyday speech which are used as special terms of medicine, such as Gr. *ophthalmos* “eye” and Lat. *manus* “hand”. According to the principle agreed upon in medical congresses, Latin is the language of anatomical terms, such as *cor* “heart”, whereas clinical terminology is based on Greek and often consists of compound words typical of this language, such as *cardiologia* “cardiology” (i.e. “doctrine of heart diseases”). Many common terms, such as *asthma*, *epidemia* and *coma*, were introduced by Hippocrates (c. 460–377), the father of medicine, as he is called. Another famous ancient doctor, Galenos (129–216), was the first to use the word *hemicrania*, from which ‘migraine’ is derived.

Thanks to the Roman scientist, Cornelius Celsus (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), Latin began to develop into the second language of medicine. He replaced many Greek scientific terms with Latin expressions; consequently, instead of the Hippocratic word *mys*, he started to use *musculus* “muscle” (orig. “little mouse”; cf. Finnish “muskeli”). In the early Middle Ages, the heritage of ancient medicine was in the hands of the Arabs, which was why some Arab words, such as *alcohol*, spread to the Western World. The mediaeval belief of the influence of stars on the sublunary world is reflected in the neologism *influentia* “influenza”.

In the more recent centuries, medical terminology began to grow fast, due to the progress of scientific research and an increase in related inventions. To name new things, old Greek and Latin words could be used in new meanings. For example, in 1838, the word *bacterium*, the meaning of which in ancient Greek was “beggar’s staff”, came to mean “staff-shaped microbe”. Similarly, the Latin word *virus* “poison” began to be used to mean “pathogene smaller than bacteria”. Many neologisms were made by combining elements from Latin and Greek in a new way. For example, the instrument used by a doctor for listening to a patient’s heart or lungs was invented in 1816 and named *stethoscope* (Gr. *stethos* “breast” + *skopein* “watch”). One gets a good idea of how to combine various components to make a compound word by examining the longest ever known term of medical Latin, *pneumonoultramicroscopicosilicovulcanoconiosis*, which was coined in 1939 and consists of 46 letters. The diagnosing doctor can describe this illness with one word only, whereas the translation requires a wordy expression indeed: “pneumoconiosis caused by respiration of volcanic ashes invisible to the common microscope”. The matter itself came to the fore in April 2010, when the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafllajökull, erupted.