

Researcher finds symbolic overtones in the names of cancer medicines

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Linguistics expert Lewis Glinert, professor of Asian and Middle Eastern languages and literatures at Dartmouth, has found that the names of cancer medicines (common, trade, and generic names), often contain sounds associated with lightness, smallness, and fastness. He says that this might have a subtle effect on both the patient taking the medicine and the doctor prescribing it.

The study, titled “Chemotherapy as language: Sound symbolism in cancer medication names,” was published online on Feb. 4, 2008, in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*. Glinert collaborated with Gregory Abel, a co-author on the study who is with the Center for Outcomes and Policy Research at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and a member of the Dartmouth Class of 1991.

In their paper, Abel and Glinert explain that the use of language and narrative and its significance in caring for patients has been studied. Their examination adds a linguistic layer to the scholarship, deepening the understanding of how the sounds in a medication’s name might have an underlying symbolism. The team looked at the sound symbolism of 60 frequently used cancer medications. Sound symbolism is the phenomenon where tiny bits of sounds have intrinsic connotations.

“Medications are a bridge between patients and health care providers, and our findings might point to some symbolic and subtle, yet powerful, associations with the names of those medications,” says Glinert, who is also affiliated with Dartmouth’s program in linguistics and cognitive

science. “The fact that sounds that elicit lightness, smallness, and fastness were found in the names of cancer medicines might suggest that it helps patients handle the therapy.”

The collaboration between Abel and Glinert began in 2005 when Abel approached Glinert at a Food and Drug Administration forum on direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising.

“Gregory recognized our mutual Dartmouth connection,” says Glinert, “and he asked if linguistics might enable him to test a hypothesis about whether the sounds of chemotherapy drug names might be helping patients cope with their treatment.”

Dartmouth undergraduate Laura Cherkas, a member of the Class of 2008, helped Glinert and Abel with their analysis.

“I’m especially interested in concepts relating to the existence of language universals, like those found in sound symbolism,” says Cherkas, who will minor in linguistics. “I was surprised I was able to get so involved in the project. I expected to be photocopying or looking for articles, but I ended up doing in-depth research, calculating data, and actually contributing to the article itself. I learned about all the work that goes into publishing a scholarly article: from initial research to data analysis to writing drafts to having the manuscript vetted by scholars in the field.”

Generic and trade names are subjected to a series of approvals, including scrutiny from the United States Adopted Name Council, the World Health Organization, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Abel and Glinert suggest that future studies examine both patient and provider reactions to medication names to get a more nuanced understanding of the impact of those names. This added data should help organizations guide the naming of medications.

Source: Dartmouth College

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