

Editorial

Often-ness

An acquaintance used to cavil loudly whenever she heard anyone use the word “ambiguous.” The gist of her complaint was, why didn’t the person just say “confused” and get it over with in half as many syllables? She was somewhat older than I, so out of respect I forebore suggesting that a glance at the dictionary would inform her that ambiguous and confused are not synonyms. As she obviously did not know the definitions, however, and given the contexts in which she generally heard the words, it probably mattered little whether or not they were used interchangeably.

To state that it “doesn’t matter” if words are used incorrectly gives me the same awful feeling in my ears that I get from pulling apart wads of dense cotton batting. My insistence as both a parent and a pedagogue was always that, if people do not know the meaning of what they say, they cannot expect to make anyone else understand their thoughts and feelings, much less articulate such thoughts and feelings to themselves.

Obviously, in scientific papers, exactness of language is essential, particularly when referring to issues that affect patient outcomes, such as critical results of animal studies and clinical trials. Truly, one can be neither ambiguous nor confused with respect to study designs, dosages and routes of drug administration, methods of evaluating beneficial and adverse effects, tests for statistical analysis, and much, much more. All of this brings me to the meanings and use of incidence, prevalence, and frequency.

Although I move heartlessly to delete when I encounter made-up words in manuscripts, I chose to exercise editorial license in the title above. Often-ness is, in fact, the basic essence of the three focus words. They are no more synonymous, however, than ambiguous and confused, but they all, espe-

cially incidence, are often made to stand in for each other in the scientific literature.

Our language is challenging, albeit obfuscatory, due to the fact that we can choose from among several closely related definitions of many words. Therefore, different journals and publishers stand by their preference in various areas of usage. As I mentioned in an earlier editorial (**Pharmacotherapy**, 1986;6(4):137), Russell Miller was a wonderful teacher of the editor’s craft, and one of the first things on which he instructed me was the (or at least a) right way to use incidence, prevalence, and frequency. At the end of our telephone conversation, with rather a red face for not having consulted them before, I reached for some of the professional styleguides that line my desk and found similar, although not always exactly the same, guidelines. Thus it was necessary for me to make my choice of rules, and I did not hesitate to accept Russell’s.

Authors who find their text changed in this regard may rest assured that a reason underlies the alteration(s), and I am pleased to set it forth as follows:

Incidence—the rate of occurrence per unit of time or per unit of population—The incidence of cleft palate is 1 per every 10,000 live births.

Prevalence—the state of prevailing or of being widespread—The prevalence of kwashiorkor is 3% in underdeveloped countries whereas it is only 0.01% in industrialized nations.

Frequency—the state of occurring more or less often—The frequency of nausea was greatest in the group that received placebo.

I sincerely hope that any misunderstanding or distress caused by my editing will diminish with this elucidation.

(*Pharmacotherapy* 1989;9(1):1)

Sarah Jeffries
Associate Editor