

# The Words of Disordered Consciousness

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**M**EDICINE PROVIDES ITS PRACTITIONERS WITH A SPECTRUM OF USEFUL words to describe the many possible states of disordered consciousness. And we define consciousness as the patient's level of alertness, awareness of, and responsiveness to, his immediate environment.

The most profound loss of consciousness, short of cerebral death, is called coma, a word descending directly from a Greek word originally meaning a state of insensibility, and related to the Greek term, *comein*, meaning to lie down or to sleep. This root word, somehow, also defines hair; and so, *acomia* describes a state of baldness (a-, being a privative prefix); and those mobile astronomic bodies of the autumn night skies, because of their visible tails resembling hair, are hence called comets.

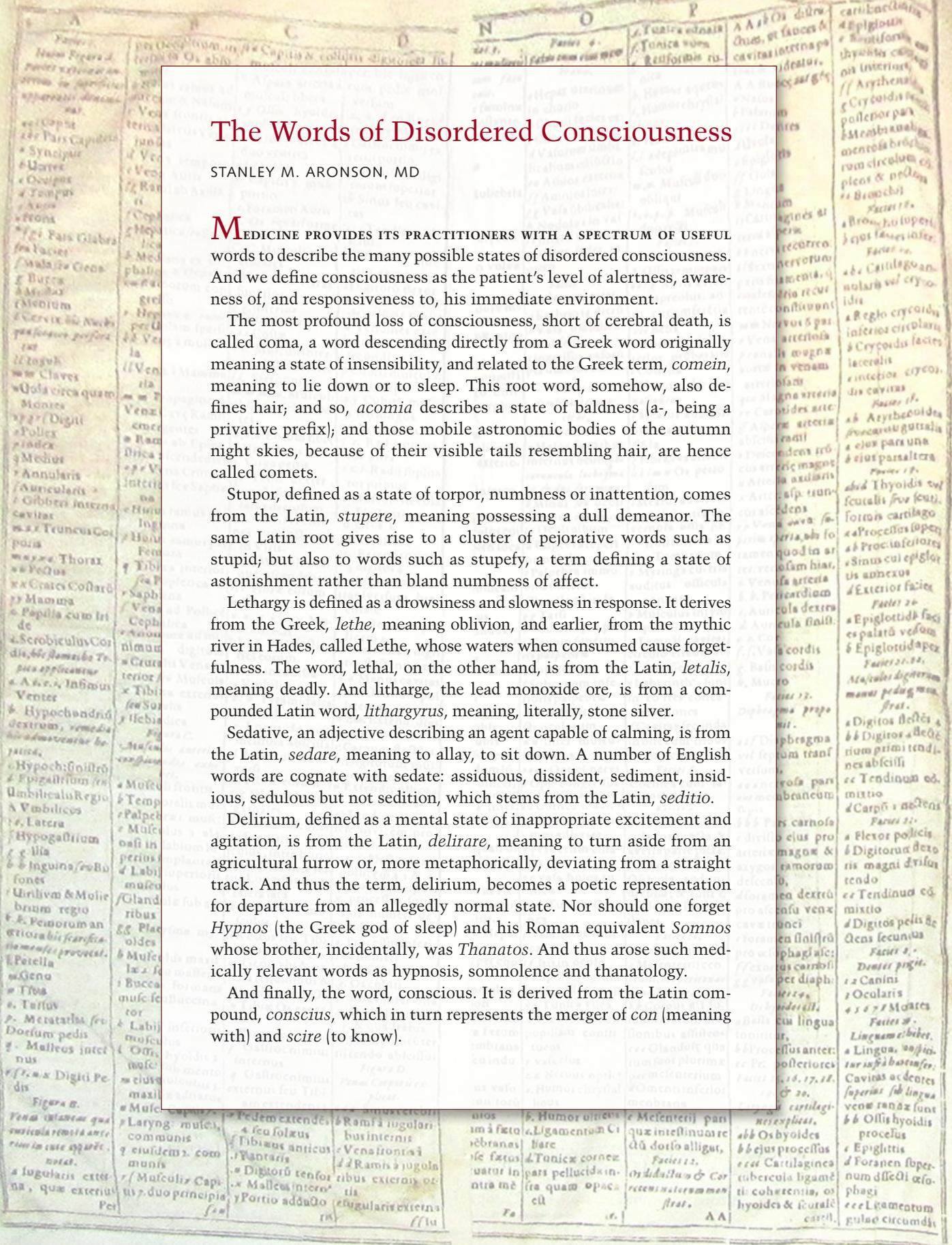
Stupor, defined as a state of torpor, numbness or inattention, comes from the Latin, *stupere*, meaning possessing a dull demeanor. The same Latin root gives rise to a cluster of pejorative words such as stupid; but also to words such as stupefy, a term defining a state of astonishment rather than bland numbness of affect.

Lethargy is defined as a drowsiness and slowness in response. It derives from the Greek, *lethe*, meaning oblivion, and earlier, from the mythic river in Hades, called Lethe, whose waters when consumed cause forgetfulness. The word, lethal, on the other hand, is from the Latin, *letalis*, meaning deadly. And litharge, the lead monoxide ore, is from a compounded Latin word, *lithargyrus*, meaning, literally, stone silver.

Sedative, an adjective describing an agent capable of calming, is from the Latin, *sedare*, meaning to allay, to sit down. A number of English words are cognate with sedate: assiduous, dissident, sediment, insidious, sedulous but not sedition, which stems from the Latin, *seditio*.

Delirium, defined as a mental state of inappropriate excitement and agitation, is from the Latin, *delirare*, meaning to turn aside from an agricultural furrow or, more metaphorically, deviating from a straight track. And thus the term, delirium, becomes a poetic representation for departure from an allegedly normal state. Nor should one forget *Hypnos* (the Greek god of sleep) and his Roman equivalent *Somnos* whose brother, incidentally, was *Thanatos*. And thus arose such medically relevant words as hypnosis, somnolence and thanatology.

And finally, the word, conscious. It is derived from the Latin compound, *consciūs*, which in turn represents the merger of *con* (meaning with) and *scire* (to know).



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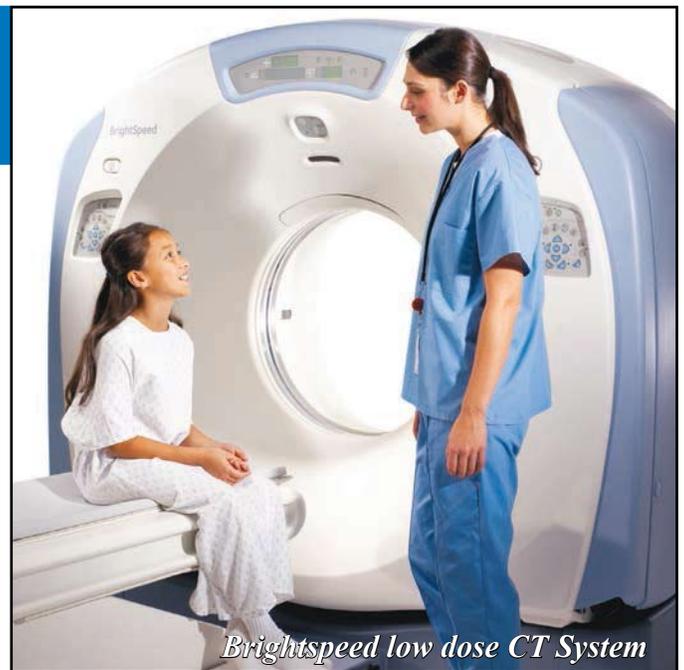
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## Postcards from the Past: 1913

MARY KORR  
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

### Antiseptic Glee Club performs at RIH Club fete

On February 13, 1913, the 13th annual dinner of the Rhode Island Hospital Club was held at the Crown Hotel on Weybosset Street. According to a subsequent report in the *Providence Medical Journal*, "the hoodoo suggested by the numerical anniversary, the day of the month and the year, was not in evidence, as under the timid but altogether satisfactory guidance of Dr. Charles H. Higgins, as President and toastmaster, the unlucky anniversary was passed with great enjoyment..."

Not quite. The first tenor in the Antiseptic Glee Club (under Dr. Rice's leadership) "suffered a rupture of the left posterior crico-arytenoid," according to the article.

Nevertheless, the 100 guests enjoyed the repast: Blue Point oysters, Mock Turtle Amontillado, Pommies Saratoga, mashed turnip, chiffonade salad, followed by harlequin ice cream and demi-tasse.

At the fete, Professor Courtney Langdon spoke on the demise of the general practitioner. However, stated the article, "he evidently did not appreciate the fact that half the audience was engaged in special practice when he stated that when he was alive he wanted the general practitioner but when ready to die, it was necessary to call the specialist to insure a thoroughly good job."



The Crown Hotel on Weybosset Street in Providence was the scene of many professional gatherings. On February 13, 1913, the Rhode Island Hospital Club held their annual meeting here.



### Sailing on the SS Moltke

Drs. J.M. Peters and E.B. Smith sailed on February 22, 1913, by the Hamburg-American steamer, the S.S. *Moltke*, for a trip to the West Indies.

### Pulmotor in RI

The Pulmotor was used for the first time in Rhode Island to resuscitate a case of asphyxiation by illuminating gas on January 15, 1913. Heinrich Dräger patented the Pulmotor in 1907, considered the first ventilator to be used worldwide in the history of medicine.

