The Esoteric Prefixes of Medicine
(Part II)

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A prefix consists of one or more syllables placed before a root thus providing the root with direction, quantitation, color, severity, nuance or any of a vast number of qualifying syntactical adjuncts. The liberal use of prefixes adds greater meaning and substance to the roots to which they are affixed.

Medical vocabulary, leaning heavily on Greek, is thus blessed with prefixes that more narrowly define the word, particularly prefixes that give proportion, direction or dimension. There are prefixes such as *platy*-, meaning flat as in platyhelminths or platypus; *mio*-, meaning less/lesser as in miosis or Myocene; *cata*-, meaning down, as in catastrophe; *dolicho*-, meaning lengthy, as in dolichocephaly or indulge; *ortho*-, meaning straight or correct, as in orthopedics or orthodox; *oligo*-, meaning few, as in oligodendroglia or oligarchy; *syn*-, *sym*-, meaning joined or together, as in syndrome or syntax; *leio*-, meaning smooth, as in leiomyoma or leisure; *proximo*-, meaning nearest, as in proximal or approximate; *pachy*-, meaning thick, as in pachymeningitis or pachyderm; *meta*-, meaning between, over or after, as in metabolite, metastasis or metamorphosis; and *ceno*-, meaning common or newly arrived as in cenocyte or cineole.

The ancient Greek language has provided most of the standard prefixes in medical terminology. These include prefixes such as *iso*-, meaning equal or similar to, as in isogenesis, isolate or isomer; *pleo*-, *plio*-, meaning more than as in pleocytosis, pleomorphic or Pliocene; *plesio*-, meaning near or close to as in plesiomorphic or plesiosaur.

And then there are the many prefixes beginning with the Greek letter xi, the fourteenth letter of the Greek alphabet. For example, *xeno*-, variously meaning stranger, alien and sometimes guest as in xenophobia, xenograft or xenolith; *xero*-, meaning dry as in xeroderma, xerophthalmia or xerography; *xylo*-, meaning a relationship to wood as in xylenol or xylospasm; *xipho*-, meaning sword-shaped as in xiphoidalgia or xiphoid; and *xantho*-, meaning yellow in color as in xanthochromia or xanthodermia.
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100 Years Ago:
Dr. Blumer Calls for Experts to Assess Mental Health of ‘Insane Aliens’

MARY KORR
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PROVIDENCE – At the annual meeting of the Rhode Island Medical Society on June 4, 1914, DR. G. ALDER BLUMER, superintendent at Butler Hospital from 1899-1921, offered several resolutions on the topic of the mental health of immigrants and the need for trained professionals to evaluate psychiatric disorders and for the federal government to assume the costs for the care of those already admitted.

Among the resolutions Dr. Blumer proposed to send to President Woodrow Wilson, immigration authorities and the state Congressional delegation, were the following:

WHEREAS, The entry of insane and mentally defective immigrants to this country is a menace to the mental health of the nation, not only in the present, but in succeeding generations, and

WHEREAS, This State bears a large part of the burden of caring for the insane and mentally defective aliens; and

WHEREAS, The present immigration laws, although providing for the exclusion of such immigrants, do not provide means for their examination by trained experts, nor for effective measures for the return home of insane aliens who become inmates of our institutions; and

WHEREAS, These are primarily matters of public health; therefore be it

Resolved by the Rhode Island Medical Society, That Congress be urged to provide for the mental examination of arriving immigrants by physicians in the United States Public Health Service especially trained in the diagnosis of insanity and mental defects; to provide adequate facilities for the detention and careful examination of all immigrants at large ports of entry; to provide for the detail of American medical officers on vessels bringing immigrants to this country in order that their welfare may be safeguarded and those with mental diseases or defects discovered; to provide for the assumption by the Federal Government of an equitable share of the burden of caring for dependent aliens, which is now borne entirely by the States; and to provide for the safe and humane return to their own home of those immigrants whom it is necessary to exclude and of those aliens in our public institutions who desire to return.

The matter was referred to the medical society’s House of Delegates.

Because of overcrowding at Ellis Island, ships bringing immigrants during the heyday of immigration to this country began arriving in Providence and New Bedford. Shown here is the first steamship to arrive in the new Port of Providence in December 1913. The French Fabre Line vessels, which left from Marseilles, France, stopping en route at Mediterranean ports in Portugal and Italy, were the main carriers to New England.
This photograph shows the quarterly meeting of members of the Rhode Island Medical Society held on Sept. 3, 1914 at the State Sanatorium at Wallum Pond in Burrillville, R.I. It was published in the November 1914 issue of the Providence Medical Journal.

Providence City Hall Workers
Find Century-Old Poster

PROVIDENCE – According to the Providence City Hall website, maintenance workers made a surprising discovery recently while carrying out renovation work in the Recorder of Deeds Office.

The website states: “Tucked behind a cabinet was a large poster printed in 1906 with the headline, “Remember These Things.”...This public announcement is undoubtedly the work of DR. CHARLES V. CHAPIN, who at this time was serving as the Superintendent of Health for Providence...Four years after this poster was issued, Dr. Chapin published his classic study, The Sources and Modes of Infection, and in 1911 another book, Contact Infection at the Providence City Hospital, further advanced his thesis regarding the spread of disease.”