Compiling multilingual medical dictionaries

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Why bother?

Literal, word-for-word translation of a medical term will very seldom give you the correct way of saying it in your target language. Many dictionaries I have seen give only one particular slant, or define a word only as it applies to one particular domain, or they omit the words you need altogether. I cannot always find suitable translations of medical phrases or concepts by looking them up in English in any bilingual medical dictionary. There are already a few good bilingual medical dictionaries, excellent pharmaceutical dictionaries and a few web sites that have three or four languages. But it seems that truly multilingual medical dictionaries are quite rare.

Over the past four years I have been compiling multilingual medical dictionaries (English-Spanish-Portuguese, English-French-Spanish, English-Dutch-German, etc.), simultaneously adding terms in the six European languages I know. In the past two years the dictionary has been continuously expanded, augmented, and improved. The result is a huge (7.5 megabytes in Excel and still growing) multilingual medical dictionary. Included are terms, phrases and concepts of many fields such as psychiatry, epidemiology, genomics, hematology, immunology, internal medicine, neurology, oncology, biomedicine, AIDS, ophthalmology, pathology, pharmaceutical sciences, occupational therapy, anesthesiology, bacteriology, biology and cardiology. I find that this work requires a painstaking, meticulous approach which is very demanding and at times almost overwhelming.

Decisions, decisions

For such reasons, I have found it necessary to approach medical terms from different angles, to look them up in several different languages and to compare the results. Gaining insight into a medical term in one language, then finding how the same concept is expressed in other languages, can give you new insight and understanding of that term, as you will see from this dictionary.

I am constantly faced with perplexing questions. For example, is "meiotic breakdown" the same thing as "meiotic nondisjunction"? Often I find two terms which turn out to have the same meaning, so I end up putting them together as one entry. In this manner I discovered that "Dressler's syndrome" and "postmyocardial infarction syndrome" are the same thing, and that Löffler's syndrome is the same thing as eosinophilic leukemia or hypereosinophilic syndrome.

Thousands of medical terms were not included in my dictionary if it was not possible to find, cross-check and verify consistent equivalents for them in at least four languages. Take, for example, "Lemierre's syndrome" or, in French, "syndrome de Lemierre." I could not find this term in any lan-

guages other than French and English, so there is no entry for either the English or the French term. Another medical term, "cardiobulbar syndrome," was found in four languages, but only in one European source, and I could not corroborate it in other sources from other countries. In some cases, I chose to include a legitimate term but leave it blank in several languages until such time as a source is found for that term in that language. So you will find a few gaps, or lacunae. If you have medical terms to suggest that you feel should be included, please submit them in at least three languages.

In many instances I have avoided including diseases which translate in a boring, monotonous and predictable manner, as in "Brodie's disease; la enfermedad de Brodie; a doença de Brodie; la maladie de Brodie; de ziekte van Brodie; die Brodie Krankheit". This tells the reader very little about this ailment—only that the illness was named after Brodie.

Sometimes names of pharmaceutical products were excluded because they are too new, or I could not find names for them in other languages, as in "esomeprazole magnesium" (Nexium). For English—only definitions of thousands of such new terms and new products, see <mtdesk.com/alpha.shtml> and <mtdesk.com/alpha2.shtml> (with thanks to the Andrews School of Medical Transcription for that excellent glossary and index). See also <http://policy.who.int>, the WHO Terminology Information System, for tens of thousands of pharmaceutical terms in English, French, Spanish, Russian and Latin.

Many dictionaries capitalize the first letter of each key word (or even worse, the put the key words in ALL UPPER-CASE LETTERS). I find this annoying and confusing, because in this manner you cannot tell if the word is normally capitalized or not. I use upper case letters only where they are required, such as on German nouns or proper names in English.

British spellings (haemoglobin, paediatrics, labour, etc.) have been excluded from the dictionary. Other language and spelling variants users should be aware of are Brazilian Portuguese rather than that of Portugal, and Latin American Spanish (usually) rather than the usage of Spain.

Sources

Finding accurate sources in any language is a challenge. In my experience, it is almost impossible to produce anything resembling a multilingual dictionary that is complete enough, accurate enough & reliable enough to satisfy all of the needs of all medical translators. There are so many sources on the Internet, all with their own strong points and shortcomings. Mistakes, typos and inaccurate listings abound. There are lively discussions and debates on translators' mailing lists about doubtful, sug-

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gested or correct medical terms, and often no consensus is reached. At one time or another, I have consulted nearly one-fifth of the 1,266 medical glossaries, dictionaries and medical resources listed on the "Medical resources" page on my website, at <http://www.interfold.com/translator/medsites.htm>.

German academics and universities in Germany seem to provide about ten times more online medical resources and online medical glossaries than their counterparts in the Netherlands. Why? I don't know. Spanish speaking medical translators seem to argue about terminology more than others.

English in the UK, Spanish in Spain, Mexico or Chile, or French in Canada, Belgium or Switzerland have idiomatic expressions and different spellings compared to other variants of those languages. This makes it harder to google for such words. But when you get a set of results and you find a good medical site, you can use your browser's Ctrl-F or *Find* to look for parts of words: searching for "infeccios" will find both "infecciosa" and "infeccioso". But googling will not give you good results if you search for parts of words.

I check and cross-reference every entry in each language using these sources among others:

- For French and English: *Le Grand Dictionnaire Terminologue* (GDT Express), <http://www.granddiction-naire.com/btml/fra/r_motclef/index800_1.asp>.
- For Spanish, French, Portuguese, Dutch, German and English: *Eurodicautom*, <http://europa.eu.int/eurodi-cautom/Controller>.
- For German medical technical terminology: <http://medwell24.at>.
- For German and English: *Linguadict: Das große On-line-Wörterbuch Deutsch-Englisch*, <http://www.lin-guadict.de/>.
- For Dutch, English and other languages: *VADA Gezondheid en Ziekte*, <www.vada.nl>.
- For Swedish: http://mesh.kib.ki.se/swemesh/swe-browse.cfm, Karolinska Institutet's University Library, and The Swedish Schoolnet, at <http://lexikon.nada.kth.se/cgi-bin/swe-eng>.
- For Portuguese: *O Novo Aurélio: O Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa* (3a. edição). Aurélio Buarque de Holanda Ferreira; Ed. Nova Fronteira; 1999.
- For Spanish: *Diccionario de Medicina Océano Mosby*; versión en español. Barcelona: Océano; 1996.

- For medical terms in plain English: *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Unabridged. A Mirriam-Webster, G and C Merriam Company; 1994.
- For Swedish medical terms, I consulted this excellent site: <http://mesh.kib.ki.se/swemesh/swebrowse.cfm>, from the Swedish Karolinska Institutet.
- *The Harper Collins Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (4th ed.); Ida G. Dox et al. New York: HarperResource; 2001.
- *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (28th ed.). Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders; 1994.
- And last but not least, in English: *Barron's Dictionary of Medical Terms for the non-medical person* (7th ed.). Barron's Educational Series; 2001.

Future developments

I still need a French and English-speaking bilingual or trilingual medical translator to proofread and edit the French content. I still need a Spanish-speaking bilingual medical doctor/translator to edit, correct and proofread the Spanish content. And I still need a bilingual or trilingual Brazilian medical doctor or medical translator to edit, refine and proofread the Portuguese content.

I am now adding Finnish and Swedish languages. In fact, 18% of the entries in the main medical data base already have Finnish equivalents, and 55% of the entries already have equivalents in Swedish.

Of course, it will take a long time and a lot of dedicated work to research, refine and correct some 16,300 Finnish and Swedish medical entries. If any trilingual Scandinavian medical translator is interested and wants to get involved, please send me an email. With your help, this project could easily become truly international.

Editor's note:

This article is adapted from materials first published on the author's web sites at <www.interfold.com/translator/compiling.htm> or <www.geocities.com/med_dictionary/compiling.htm> (accessed 31 July 2003). It should be noted that the *Multilingual Medical Technical Dictionary*® and other bilingual and trilingual medical dictionaries compiled by the author are offered for sale, not for open access. For details, please contact the author or visit <www.interfold.com/translator>.