

## COMPELLING COMMENTS

### Dermatologic Etymology: What's in a Name?

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Have you ever wondered how a disease got its name? For example, why is a skin tag called an acrochordon? What does it literally mean to have a viral exanthem? Why does intertrigo refer to skin folds? In the past, a familiarity with the classical languages was seen as an essential skill for practicing physicians. For medical students, learning Greek and Latin was highly recommended, and sometimes even a prerequisite. In medical terminology, the meaning of many anatomic descriptions and disease names can be derived from their Greek and Latin roots.

George Henry Fox, an American dermatologist, published his “Dermatologic Etymology” in the *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology* in 1921.<sup>1</sup> He includes a list of the Greek or Latin roots for many commonly used terms in dermatology. Acrochordon is a combination of the Greek roots ἀκρο- (acro-), which means top or extremity, and χορδή (chorde), meaning string or cord. With those roots in mind, you can see how a pedunculated growth on the skin became known as an acrochordon. Exanthem comes from the Greek word ἐξάνθημα (exanthema), which means to bloom or flower. Thus, a viral exanthem appears as a rash erupting on the skin like a blooming flower. If you can remember that intertrigo is derived from the Latin roots inter-, meaning between, and tritus (from terere),

meaning to rub, then you will understand why intertrigo occurs in the axillae and groin.

Knowing the etymology of the diseases that we treat or the diagnostic descriptions that we use may facilitate a deeper meaning for the clinician and an appreciation for the history of medicine. Next time you are reading about a disease or pathological finding, consider the etymology of the words and you may find them easier to understand and remember.

**Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** None

**Funding:** None

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