

Thoughts about Countering Creeping Confusion

by Richard Ratzan, M.D.

Dr. Ratzan was a Classics major in college whose first publication as a medical student was on the Greek for herpes (see reference * below).

The editor kindly asked me to comment on an unusual paper suggesting we rename Herpes virus "Habita virus", a paper imaginatively conceived, adroitly executed and very well written.^[^1] In it, the authors evince four reasons to support their suggestion: lack of congruence between the etymological history of "herpes" and its dermatological appearance; sociological and psychological stigma; potential confusion concerning first the different herpetic diseases and second an unrelated virus, Hepeviridae, a virus associated with diseases of the liver.

First, they correctly point out that "crawl", from the Greek ἔρπειν, does not describe many herpetic lesions, which are mostly vesicular and which, since herpes comprises such a large group of viruses, include a broad array of clinical descriptions. Beswick, in an exhaustive survey of the history of the nosology of herpes, agrees it is a poor fit and has been for a while. ^[^2] Secondly they declare,

While it is manageable with topical and oral antivirals, it is associated with not just physical discomfort, but also embarrassment and shame.

Thirdly, they suggest this terminology will confuse the public, which can not be expected to understand that other herpesvirus infections, like infectious mononucleosis, are herpes taxonomically but not related clinically to HSV1 or HSV2. Lastly, they worry a further source of confusion is the similar sounding Hepeviridae family of viruses.

This is certainly an interesting suggestion with reasons that are variably convincing. One wonders, "Why not change the name? Who could object and why? How does the medical nosological establishment affix and change names?" There are several reasons why many people would and will object. The first is historical and the "many people" would be historians (and linguistically purist dinosaurs like me). As Beswick so amply elaborates, long before the first nosologists qua nosologists of the 19th Century, e.g., Cullen, Turner, de Sauvages and Linnaeus, legitimized, so to speak, the centuries-old use of "herpes" to indicate primarily cutaneous eruptions (including, most likely, ringworm), physicians as far back as the Hippocrates Corpus and Galen utilized it. ^[^2] It is always an uphill battle, especially for an outsider, to undo or retrack a history exceeding 2400 years. Beswick's paper is incredibly exhaustive, despite its protesting it is only a "necessarily brief historical review". ^[^2] In truth, its detail and

length reminded me of Samuel Johnson's remark about John Milton's Paradise Lost:

"Paradise Lost" is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look else where for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions. [^3]

Who else might object? Besides clinicians, who have no interest in learning new names and always resist nosological innovation (and always lose or, if not lose, lag behind with persistent vernacular or eponymic terminology, e.g., "mono" versus "Epstein-Barr"), the authors are fighting a conservative establishment more stodgy and more powerful and more used to winning than organized religion or organized crime – the Mob of Nomenclature/Nomenclators of All Things Viral, i.e., The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses, aka the ICTV. [^4] The high priests of the ICTV would rightly point out that "ἕρπειν/herpes/crawl" is interesting if you are an historian, but that was then and this is now. Not only does "ἕρπειν" not adequately describe Herpesvirus, Coxsackievirus does not describe the essential criteria of the virus but only the first venue in which it was described. However, the ICTV does entertain proposals for suggested changes in their taxonomic kingdom. [^5] The proposals I read involved new species, new genera, new classifications and, when appropriate, new names with renaming, occasionally to avoid confusion, as is the motivation of the authors of the present paper. However, I saw no proposals that wished to change a name because of historical or sociological or psychological reasoning, or for the avoidance of stigma. Indeed I encountered no proposals at all that were wholly based on naming. (Question to authors: why will Habitavirus not acquire the same stigma as Herpes over time?) All proposals are from virologists with much in the way of supporting biochemical and virological data. As Davison states:

Virus classification is advanced through a voting procedure involving the members of the ICTV. The proposals on which voting takes place are prepared by the ICTV Executive Committee from submissions made by individuals in the virological community, in particular those associated with Study Groups devoted to particular virus groups (usually families). The development of taxonomy as summarized in the ICTV reports is regularly promoted, supplemented and discussed by expert publications from Study Groups, including that focused on the herpesviruses. [^6]

The ICTV takes its nomenclature quite seriously, as the ICTV makes clear:

2.1 The essential principles of virus nomenclature are: (i) to aim for stability; (ii) to avoid or reject the use of names which might cause

error or confusion; (iii) to avoid the unnecessary creation of names.

3.9 Existing names of taxa shall be retained whenever feasible.

Comment: A stable nomenclature is one of the principal aims of taxonomy and therefore changes to names that have been accepted will only be considered if the accepted name conflicts with the Rules or if a change is necessary to remove ambiguities or confusion. [^7]

It seems unlikely, therefore, that they will smile on the authors' proposal.

I enjoyed reading this paper and wish the authors luck, which they will need. I must make a full disclosure that even the editor, Dr. David Elpern, did not know, despite knowing me and my work very well. My interest in the name Herpes goes farther back than I wish to remember. Indeed, it was my first publication! [^8]

[^1]: Reese V, Croley JA and Wagner, Jr., RF. Countering Creeping Confusion: A Proposal to Re-Name Herpes Virus Taxonomy.

[^2]: Beswick TS. The origin and the use of the word herpes. *Med Hist* 1962;6:214-232.

[^3]: Johnson S. *Johnson's Chief Lives of the Poets*. New York; Henry Holt and Company: 1880: page 55.

[^4]: International Committee on Taxonomy of viruses (ICTV). <https://talk.ictvonline.org>. Accessed January 18, 2018.

[^5]: ICTV: All Proposals. https://talk.ictvonline.org/files/ictvofficialtaxonomyupdatesincethe8th_report/m/all-proposals. Accessed January 18, 2018.

[^6]: Davison AJ. Herpesvirus systematics. *Vet Microbiol*. 2010 Jun 16;143(1):52-69.

[^7]: ICTV Code. <https://talk.ictvonline.org/information/w/ictv-information/383/ictv-code>. Accessed January 18, 2018.

[^8]: White B and Ratzan RM. Rough and creepy Greek. *N Engl J Med* 1970;282:1380.