

Standardized English Translation of Clinical Medicine Disease Names

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Abstract: With the increasing frequency of global medical exchanges, the English translation of clinical medicine disease names has become a key factor affecting medical safety, the quality of academic exchanges, and the level of medical education. Meanwhile, there are certain problems in the English translation of clinical medicine disease names in China currently, mainly manifested in the prevalence of multiple translations for one term, prominent issues of literal translation and mistranslation, and inconsistent naming principles. Based on this, this paper focuses on the strategies for standardized English translation of clinical medicine disease names. By explaining the root causes of the problems existing in the current translation field, it further puts forward standardized suggestions from aspects such as establishing authoritative reference standards, following the basic principles of “respecting the originator, following conventions, and adhering to scientific norms”, strengthening medical English education, and using modern tools to assist learning. These efforts aim to gradually unify and standardize disease names, reduce ambiguities and errors, and lay a foundation for international medical exchanges and evidence-based medical research.

Keywords: Clinical medicine; Disease names; English translation; Standardization

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1. Introduction

With the continuous increase in international medical academic conferences, cross-border multi-center clinical trial bases, and the publication of medical literature, exchanges among relevant experts and scholars in the field of clinical medicine have become increasingly frequent. This requires the translation of disease names to be accurate and unified. In an environment of non-standard translation, problems such as misdiagnosis and mistreatment are likely to occur, which is an important factor affecting medical safety. Since the current practice of English translation of clinical medicine disease names in China is in a spontaneous state, unified and mandatory management norms are needed to create a good environment for medical practice and educational activities.

2. Problems in English translation of clinical medicine disease names

2.1. Prevalence of polysemy in translation

Polysemy in translation refers to the issue where a single English disease term has multiple Chinese translations. The use of multiple Chinese versions for the same English disease name not only easily causes confusion but also hinders the uniformity and accuracy of modern medical information. Researchers and learners may misunderstand due to translation differences when reading literature, reports, or cases from different sources, thereby affecting clinical decision-making and academic exchanges. For example, the standardized translation of “Myocardial Infarction” is “xīnjī gěngsǐ”, but the most commonly used translation is “xīnjī gěngsè”, and even the colloquial abbreviation “xīngěng” can be used as a substitute^[1]. Another example is “Schizophrenia”, which is literally translated as “jīngshén fēnliè zhèng” in general use, but in Taiwan, China, it is translated as “sījué shītáo zhèng”. Although this translation shows a certain degree of humanistic care, it fails to intuitively reflect the characteristics of the disease^[2]. Additionally, the standardized translation of “Contusion” is “cuòshāng”, but it can also be described using alternative terms such as “zhuàngshāng”, “kēshāng”, and “qīngzhǒng”^[3].

The causes of polysemy in translation mainly lie in two aspects. Firstly, during the initial introduction of modern medicine, there was a lack of unified standards, and different translators, translation agencies, and academic researchers adopted different translation methods, which were then spread and popularized simultaneously. Secondly, translation differences exist between different regions. For instance, although mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan all use Chinese, their translations are not the same, resulting in the coexistence of multiple translations under the influence of historical evolution^[4].

2.2. Prominent issues of literal translation and mistranslation

Literal translation refers to mechanical problems in the translation of clinical disease names. The translated terms are rigid and obscure, as translators overly adhere to the superficial meaning of English words and adopt a word-for-word translation approach, leading to a significant discrepancy between the translation results and the sense of Chinese medical language, and even creating difficulties in understanding. For example, the literal translation of “Waterhammer pulse” is “shuǐchuí mài”, which is not only difficult to understand but also the description of “water hammer” is divorced from the Chinese medical context, thus affecting the translation effect^[5]. Therefore, the medical community usually adopts more vivid and commonly used translations such as “shuǐzhǒng mài” or “xiànlòu mài”. Another example: “Afterbrain” is literally translated as “hòunǎo”, which is easily confused with “Hindbrain” (the anatomical term for “hòunǎo” in Chinese). Hence, its more accurate translation is “yánsuǐ”, and the literal translation has been phased out due to its misleading nature^[6]. There is also “Hashimoto’s disease”, which is often literally translated as “qiáoběn bìng” in the medical field. Although this is a customary translation, it fails to reflect the characteristics and essence of the disease.

Mistranslation generally refers to the problem of fundamental misunderstanding, that is, translators choose incorrect Chinese translation terms due to insufficient medical knowledge and failure to understand the pathological or physiological characteristics in the medical context. For example, the correct translation of “Iridodonesis” is “hóngmó zhènchàn”, but in some cases, it is translated as “hóngmó dǒudòng”. Although the two seem similar, they are fundamentally different and cannot convey its specific medical meaning^[7].

2.3. Lack of uniform naming principles

The lack of uniform naming principles is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, there is no consistency in the

application of transliteration and free translation principles, especially for diseases named after people and new medical terms, where the use of transliteration and free translation has not been standardized. For example, transliteration is mainly used for Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease, and these two translations have now been generally accepted by the public. In contrast, the "transliteration + free translation" approach is adopted for Hodgkin's lymphoma and Down syndrome^[8]. In addition, there are more confusing cases, such as Ménière's disease: its transliteration "méiniāi bìng" is used in mainland China; the "transliteration + free translation" version "Méinírshì zhèng" is adopted in Taiwan, China; and there is also the translation "měiniěrzōnghé zhèng", which is an inaccurate combination of transliteration and free translation but is widely used among the public^[9].

Second, the evolution and update of terms are not reflected. This means that in the process of updating medical knowledge, some English terms have been eliminated due to issues of discrimination or inaccuracy, but their Chinese translations are still in use and have not been updated and optimized in a timely manner. For example, Old Tuberculin (OT) was once translated as "jiù jiéhéjùn sù"; however, with the deepening of relevant research, the translation "jiéhéjūnsùchúndànbái yǎnshēngwù" (PPD) is now used. Nevertheless, the former translation has not been explicitly eliminated and is still used in some literatures^[10].

3. Strategies for standardized English translation of clinical medicine disease names

3.1. Establishing authoritative reference standards

Authoritative reference standards are the core basis for the English translation of clinical medicine disease names. Therefore, in the construction of a standardized translation mechanism, priority should be given to establishing a reference standard database, and the habit of consulting relevant standards should be formed in translation practice; in addition, officially approved names should be taken as the first choice.

First, establish an international standard terminology set. At the level of international standard terminology, the following three standards should be taken as the foundation. The first is ICD-11 (11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases), issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), which provides clear indicators for disease statistics, disease reporting, and disease classification in the international context and serves as a core translation basis. The second is MeSH (Medical Subject Headings), compiled by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) of the United States, which provides a standardized thesaurus for literature indexing in the PubMed/MEDLINE database and features higher coverage and accuracy in literature retrieval^[11]. The third is SNOMED CT (Systematized Nomenclature of Medicine - Clinical Terms), an international standard for the structuring of electronic medical records, which contains the most comprehensive and detailed clinical terminology.

Second, establish a reference set of domestic authoritative reference books. The first is Medical Terms reviewed and published by the National Committee for Terminology in Sciences and Technologies, which has national standardization characteristics and is one of the most typical and authoritative reference books in China^[12]. The second includes English-Chinese Medical Dictionaries published by well-known publishing houses such as People's Medical Publishing House and Peking University Medical Press, which have the advantage of a relatively fast update speed.

3.2. Adhere to the fundamental principles of "following the owner's naming, observing common usage, and ensuring scientific standardization"

"Following the owner's naming, observing common usage, and ensuring scientific standardization" are the

fundamental principles for English translation of clinical medicine disease names, as well as the practical requirements for standardized translation.

First, “following the owner’s designation” aims to respect the inherent and internationally recognized standard names in English. That is, for diseases with existing internationally accepted names, direct adoption should be used in translation instead of creating different translations. For example, “Parkinson’s disease” has become an internationally accepted name; in translation, it can be directly transliterated as “Pàjīnsēn Bìng” instead of being renamed “Zhèrchàn Mábi” based on its actual symptoms, so as to ensure the consistency of translation results with international standards^[13].

Second, “respecting common usage” means that although some disease names may be unreasonable or incorrect, due to long-term and widespread use and acceptance by the general public and relevant personnel in the medical field, the commonly used translations should be adopted to avoid confusion caused by newly created names. For example, “Heart Failure” has always been translated as “xīnlì shuāijié”, so there is no need to replace it with the literal translation “xīnzàng tíngtiào”. Another example is “Diabetes Mellitus”, which can also retain the translation “tángniàobìng” instead of being literally translated as “míniàobìng”.

Third, “maintaining scientific standards” requires that translations should accurately reflect the nature and characteristics of diseases, including etiology, pathology, site of onset, and symptoms, so as to ensure that the translation conforms to medical logic. For example, in accordance with the principle of scientific standards, “SARS-CoV-2” should be rigorously translated as “yánzhòng jíxìng hūxī zōnghézhēng guānzhuàng bìngdú 2 xíng”, which is not only accurately descriptive but also strictly standardized^[14].

3.3. Strengthen medical English education

The non-standard translation of clinical medicine disease names is mostly caused by non-standard dissemination. Therefore, making changes and standardization from the perspective of medical English education is an important measure to improve the standardization of translations. It enables contemporary medical students to fully understand the translation standards, principles, and commonly used translated terms for disease names, avoiding errors in subsequent use.

First, efforts should be made to promote the integration and optimization of medical English courses. In the medical education system, medical English should not be offered in isolation; instead, it should be integrated with professional courses such as anatomy, pathology, internal medicine, and surgery. This allows students to learn the corresponding English translations from different professional perspectives and master the relevant translated terms and their usage.

Second, promote the development of terminology teaching. Medical colleges and universities can provide teaching activities related to medical terminology for students through special lectures, elective courses, etc., focusing on teaching content such as the word-formation of medical terms. The teaching should extend from English to Greek and Latin roots, and help students grasp the characteristics of English prefixes and suffixes, thereby equipping them with the ability to decipher complex medical terms. For example, the suffix “-itis” indicates inflammation, and the prefix “hepat-” refers to the body part “liver”, so the meaning of “hepatitis” as “gānyán” can be easily understood^[15].

Third, enhance students’ practical training skills. On the one hand, teachers should organize students to strengthen the comparative use of Chinese and English terms in links such as case discussions, medical record writing, and literature summaries, cultivating students’ habit of using standardized medical term translations. On

the other hand, it is necessary to develop students' ability to write English academic papers, enabling them to deeply understand and master the translation characteristics of Chinese and English medical terms in academic research.

3.4. Utilize modern tools to assist learning

With the support of the Internet and artificial intelligence, modern tools also provide important assistance for the English translation of clinical medicine disease names.

First, construct medical terminology databases and online dictionaries. On the one hand, platforms such as the WHO ICD-11 online platform, NLM MeSH database, and Term Online can be used to query translation results of relevant names; on the other hand, software such as English-Chinese medical dictionary apps and the built-in dictionary in medication assistant tools can be utilized to obtain standardized disease name translations through more convenient channels.

Second, apply computer-aided translation and terminology management systems. Governments and relevant national-level institutions should establish a unified medical terminology database and launch intelligent translation assistance software, which can provide accurate translations by referring to the database during processes such as literature reading and paper writing.

Third, apply artificial intelligence and big data systems. Relevant institutions can develop artificial intelligence terminology verification tools based on national standards to automatically identify non-standard vocabulary and incorrect terms in texts, literatures, reports, and medical records, thereby providing assistance to users.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the standardization of English translations for clinical medicine disease names is not a simple task that can be accomplished overnight. It requires the development of universal normative principles through long-term efforts and educational guidance to enhance the rigor of medical quality, academic standards, and international exchanges. To address the current issues such as multiple translations for a single term, mistranslations, and inconsistent standards, educators, practitioners, and researchers across the medical field need to participate collectively while adhering to authoritative standards.

By integrating professional English education into the medical talent training system and leveraging the advantages of modern information technology tools, we can advance the standardization of disease name translations and improve the levels of clinical medicine, scientific research, and education in China.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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