Coronavirus: What's in a Name?

Dr. Russell:

Coming to you from the ReachMD studios, this is *COVID-19: On the Frontlines*. Today's episode will be Coronavirus: What's in a Name. I'm your host, Dr. John Russell.

So, what's in a name? Shakespeare said, 'A rose by any other name will still smell as sweet.' So, today, I found myself on social media witnessing a fight from two people that I both liked very much, about the use of the term 'China coronavirus.' I know it's a hot topic these days, so I thought I'd take a deeper dive.

So, certainly as new discoveries are made in medicine, they acquire a name. James Parkinson was a British doctor in the late 1700s who wrote of the shaking palsy that now bears his name. Some names are acquired through the media, such as calling ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. And I clearly remember being pimped in medical school after identifying on rounds a patient having Heberden's nodes by being asked, 'Who was Heberden?' So, some diseases acquire the name of the organism, like strep throat, or the anatomy impacted, like epiglottitis. Fifth disease was the fifth viral exanthem identified, but never got another name. By the way, measles was the first disease identified.

But lots of disease names over the years have acquired names from locations. Lyme is a town in Connecticut. Coxsackie is a city in New York. Zika is a forest in Uganda.

But naming something can have consequences. On May 11, 1982, the *New York Times* referred to the new disorder being seen in New York City as GRID, gay-related immunodeficiency, which eventually adopted the acronym of AIDS. I'm not sure the term 'GRID' did anything but make things harder for a population that was also suffering very greatly at the time.

So, what about newer infections. Ebola is a river in the Congo. Ebola was discovered in 1976 in a village called Yambuku. A group of scientists discussing that matter worried that naming it Yambuku would stigmatize this village. The Lassa virus, causing Lassa fever, did that to the Nigerian town after its discovery in 1969. The scientists thought about a river, but the Congo River already was attached to Crimean-Congo Fever. So the scientists looked at a map and found the Ebola River, which meant 'Black River' in the local language, on a map, and thought it was a close river, why don't we name it Ebola.

But what they later discovered, it was – wasn't even the closest river to that particular village. So, using rivers for names has been something that's happened for a long time. West Nile Virus was discovered in the late 1930s. Hanta virus was named after the Hantan River in South Korea.

Well, what about Spanish Influenza? Well, actually Spanish Influenza began at an Army base in Kansas, not on the Iberian Peninsula. So, this disease that started in Kansas, we sent troops over to World War I, they lived in trenches, and somehow it mutated. So, Spain remained neutral during World War I, so it was not subject to wartime sensors as other European countries were. When the Spanish King Alfonso came down with the disorder in May 1918, coverage increased. So, this led to other countries calling it the Spanish Flu, although interestingly enough, the Spanish folks at the time called it the French Flu.

So, what about Japanese Encephalitis? That name is tethered to a people, not a place. So, this disease emerged in the late 1800s in Japan, and the virus itself was isolated in the 1930s. It is the most common epidemic encephalitis throughout Asia. Is that term offensive? So, in May 2015, the WHO put forth naming guidelines of new infections to limit unnecessary negative effects on nations, economies, and peoples. They stated that, once a disease is given a name in the press, it's hard to undo this name.

So, what did they establish as best practices for naming a new disorder? The best practices state that a name should consist of generic

terms based on symptoms the disease causes, and more specific terms as more is known. So, as more is known about the disease and its etiology, you can elaborate on the name. They recommended that geographic locations, such as MERS, Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome, people's names, such as Jacob-Creutzfeldt, or specific species of animals, swine flu, not be used. They also recommended that we don't use certain occupations, like Legionnaire's disease, and terms that are fear-provoking, fatal epidemic.

So, based on these recommendations from 2015, that's how they came up with COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019. So, calling something the China coronavirus or the Chinese coronavirus probably is not apropos. Stay well.

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