

Glutching, nish, and other idioms: Reducing misunderstanding and improving patient safety during patient-clinician encounters in Newfoundland and Labrador

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“I was going over the bridge when I found my chest and was all overcome. I said to my wife - I’m all in”

As physicians, we have all been taught that “history is 90% of the diagnosis”; and I am willing to bet that we have all struggled through a patient interview made difficult by a language barrier. But it is not just foreign language that poses a dilemma; dialects, colloquialisms and slang can also affect our interpretation of what a patient is trying to say. As Burnum (1984) states “We do not and cannot care for the patient we do not understand” [1]. Clear communication is vital to patient safety, diagnosis and management.

It is generally agreed that patient safety is predominantly about the proper design of health systems and patient care processes, but of equal importance is the art of communication. The most common underlying cause of serious adverse events resulting in death or permanent loss of bodily function in the United States is communication failure [2]. Communication failures come in many forms – failure to recognize language or health literacy barriers to patient/family understanding, or failure to transmit important patient information when handing a patient over to the care of another physician, among others [2].

In 1991, O’Dwyer [3] introduced the idea that physicians in Newfoundland and Labrador need to recognize dialect differences in order to improve communication between patients and physicians. In his article, a small number of examples were given which were taken from two sources:

The Dictionary of Newfoundland English and the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive. Not only will awareness and understanding of the Newfoundland dialect improve communication, but it will also reduce the misrepresentation of symptoms, thereby improving patient safety.

Newfoundland and Labrador has a unique dialect and recognition of this difference is vital to health care in this province. The aim of this article is to highlight the need for healthcare practitioners in this province to understand the variety of dialects, as well as celebrate our wonderful culture. Between 2009 and 2015, our research team has collected examples of unique words or phrases used by patients, from physicians working across NL.

The study identified 106 discrete words or phrases that were felt to be unique to NL. Many were identified by multiple participants. Participants were also asked to interpret what the word or phrase meant and to indicate the clinical setting in which it was used. The responses were heard in a variety of settings, including family practice, the emergency room (ER), specialist's clinics, inpatient wards and in discussion with other healthcare providers. Each discrete word or phrase was then cross referenced against bodies of work related to the NL language, which include, "Devine's Folk Lore of Newfoundland" [4], "The Dictionary of Newfoundland English" [5] and "The Newfoundland Tongue" [6].

Many words or phrases had multiple spellings or multiple interpretations, and some were identified in many different regions of the province. Table 1 below presents a number of the results collected; a complete list is available by request from the principal investigator (Dr. Sarah Mathieson). Interpretation refers to those provided by study participants, while Definition refers to the definition of each word/phrase as found in the aforementioned references. Spellings used will be as presented in the aforementioned references where any discrepancy was noted.

While some of these words and phrases may seem natural to some of us, many will be unknown. As a clinical clerk I looked after a woman admitted for non-ST-elevation myocardial infarction (heart attack). Each day I asked if she had any pain and each day she said "just a smurting". If only I had known then what I know now.

Word/Phrase	Interpretation	Definition
scram	numb and tingly	cramped, paralyzed or stiff from disease or injury
served me barbarous	treated me badly	bad or atrocious in quality or condition
roach	hoarse	of a voice, deep, rasping, hoarse; distorted
squish	not straight	askew; out of alignment; in desperate straits
rind	scrape	to scrape the skin off; to skin the knee
glutch	swallow or gulp	a gulp or swallow; throat
I'm all in	short of breath	beat out
overcome	anxiety; short of breath; pre-syncope (faint)	-
giddy	dizzy; unbalanced	-
lost my nature	erectile dysfunction; sexual problems	to become impotent; nature = sexual drive
poisoned	frustrated	annoyed, irritated, disappointed; disgusted
a scrunching and a gnawing	crepitus	scrunching = to produce a crushing, grating sound
smurts/smerts	hurts, pain	pain or sting
fish or no fish	to have to do it	regardless of circumstances, expression of determination
nish/niche	tender, painful, soft, unwell, sensitive, paresthesia (numbness)	soft or tender, sore or inflamed, delicate, brittle
find	pain, sore, aware of a problem with a body part	to feel a sensation (discomfort or pain), to suffer from, to act as a midwife "she found the child"
hard pain	very painful, extreme, intense	-

Table 1: Selected words or phrases found to be unique to Newfoundland and Labrador.

References

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