

The Words of Medicine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Fortune's undergraduate years were largely devoted to classical and modern languages, following which he studied medicine at McGill and public health at Harvard. He has spent the majority of his professional life as a physician to Native Americans, especially in Alaska, but has also relished the medical profession as a hospital administrator, diplomat, clinical teacher, medical historian, and editor. He has written extensively on the history of medicine in the arctic regions, and in 1990 was named Alaska Historian of the Year for his book *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Dr. Fortune is currently Professor in the Biomedical Program at the University of Alaska Anchorage and Clinical Professor of Family Medicine at the University of Washington. He and his wife live on a lakeshore about 50 miles north of Anchorage, Alaska.

The Words of Medicine
Sources, Meanings, and Delights

ROBERT FORTUINE

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*To my wife Sheila,
who has shared my life for forty happy and fulfilling years*

Acknowledgments

MORE THAN TO ANYONE ELSE, I owe my interest in the medical vocabulary and in medical history to Dr. William Willoughby Francis, the self-described “second cousin with nephew status” of Sir William Osler. During my medical student days, Dr. Francis was the librarian (and cataloger) of the splendid collection of old medical books which Osler bequeathed to his alma mater, McGill University. As faculty advisor for the Osler Society, he carefully nurtured and nourished any spark of interest in medical history among students deeply preoccupied at the time with laboratories, clinics, and examinations. Dr. Francis retained his infectious enthusiasm for medical and linguistic scholarship right through to the year of his death in 1959 at the age of 82, after which I had the privilege of renting a room in his widow’s apartment for several months during my fourth year of medical school. Long after I cut loose from the academic environment and became increasingly absorbed in the rigors of clinical practice in the Northern regions, the image of this cheerful, witty, and immensely learned man kept coming back to me and I came to appreciate more and more his wide-ranging knowledge of history, classical languages, and his personal embodiment of medical humanism. In a real sense, this book is part of his legacy.

I hope the reader will find at least a small measure of the enjoyment in reading this book that I have had in researching and writing it. The work has been a project of mine for many years now, one which kept intruding itself into my life. For months at a time, and even for a year or two, I would put it aside and turn to more pressing tasks. Then once again a medical word which was new to me and which illumined my consciousness with a striking image would leap out at me from the pages of a medical journal or text, and for the next few weeks or months I would be back at my dictionaries and lists.

No one could undertake a project like this without access to and use of many reference works on language, medicine, and the history of medicine. As for anyone who writes on the English language, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition) was absolutely indispensable. I used this work mainly in its CD ROM version, which offers some remarkably helpful search features. This grand monument of meticulous scholarship, quite aside from its usefulness in my work, was a source of never-ending delight and astonishment. Two other indispensable references were *Liddell and Scott’s*

Greek-English Lexicon, and the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. In addition, I used various etymological dictionaries, medical dictionaries, word study books, foreign language dictionaries, and medical texts, most of which are listed at the end of the book. Not listed are many medical journal articles and other resources in clinical medicine from which I have gleaned from time to time new or interesting words or turns of phrase.

Robert Fortune

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