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## MEDICAL EPONYMS OF MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGIN

**Key words:** medical terminology, eponyms, mythonyms

### 1. Introduction

The term “eponym” in linguistics refers to a word or phrase coined from a proper name. It is estimated that about 15% per cent of all medical terms are eponyms, and their amount is suggested to be between a few thousands up to 30 000 [Bujalková 2011, 20; Kucharz 2015, 68, 414].

Almost all medical eponyms are derived from the name of discoverer, usually the author who first described a disease, symptom, sign or other medical phenomenon as well as inventor of the test, surgical tool, reagent or laboratory assay [Kudlovitz 2014, 1-7]. A very few medical eponyms originate from names of patients or literary figures. All mentioned above eponyms are anthroponyms. Other forms of medical eponyms are toponyms, the terms which use geographical terms in naming disease, virus, bacteria or genetic mutation [Džuganová 2012, 1, 303]. A small group of medical eponyms are mythonyms. They are very interesting medical terms based on Greek, Roman or other mythology [Džuganová 2013, 4, 63-67]. The terms were described and the medical meaning were juxtaposed with mythological story. Mythological descriptions may have variants and the study used the most common explanation of the myth [Grant and Hazel 2000, 1-310; Stankiewicz 2017, 1-400].

Medical mythonyms may be classified according to their medical meaning into: (1) anatomical mythonyms; (2) physiological mythonyms; (3) pathological mythonyms; (4) psychiatric and psychological mythonyms; (5) mythonyms describing medical specialties (Table 1).

## 2. Anatomical mythonyms

Anatomical mythonyms which are currently used in medical literature are summarized in the first chapter of the Table 1. Anatomical terminology adopted by the Federative Committee on Anatomical Terminology eliminated eponyms almost completely and substituted them with common terms [Urbanowicz 2004, 7]. For example, Ammon's horn is currently termed "the proper hippocampus". Despite tendency to omit eponyms, a new term "hippocampus" is also an eponym but not anthroponym. Some eponyms were considered by the authors of updated anatomical terminology as "common words" and retained in the nomenclature (e.g. hippocampus, iris, hymen). Despite these endeavors medical literature uses most of traditional anatomical mythonyms. It is especially visible in clinical handbooks.

**Table 1**

Medical eponyms of mythological origin

<b>Anatomical mythonyms</b>	Panacea
Achilles tendon	Gigantism
Ammon's horn	Hermaphrodite
Arachnoidea mater	Minerva jacket
Atlas	Proteus syndrome
Cupid's bow	Satyr ears
Erogenous zones	
Hippocampus	<b>Psychiatric and psychological</b>
Hymen	<b>mythonyms</b>
Iris	Electra complex
Mons Veneri	Oedipus complex
Mons Venus	Narcissm
	Nymphomania
<b>Physiological mythonyms</b>	Ondine curse
Caput medusae	Panic
Chimerism	Satyriasis
Chimeric proteins	Ulysses syndrome
Janus kinase	
Klotho protein	<b>Mythonyms referring to medical</b>
Lymph	<b>specialties</b>
	Hygiena, Venerology

### 2.1. Achilles tendon

Achilles tendon or calcaneal tendon (Latin: tendo calcaneus) also known as the heel cord is the thickest tendon of the human body. The tendon connects the plantaris, gastrocnemius and soleus muscles with the calcaneus (heel) bone. The muscles are responsible for plantar flexion of the foot at the ankle and flexion at the knee.

Achilles (Greek: Ἀχιλλεύς) was the greatest warrior described in Iliad [Karenberg 2012-2013, 6-7, 9-10]. He was a son of Peleus, the mortal king of the Myrmidons and immortal nymph Thetis. His mother wanted to make him immortal by dipping the baby in the river Styx. She held his by one heel and only this part of Achilles' body was vulnerable. Finally, Achilles died killed by Paris before Troy was conquest. Paris hit Achilles with an arrow into his heel. The phrase "Achilles' heel" is a metaphor for the weakest part or most vulnerable spot or aspect in spite of overall strength.

## 2.2. Ammon's horn

The Ammon's horn or hippocampus proper is a part of the hippocampus (see later), a major component of the brain located under the cerebral cortex. The Ammon's horn consists of four regions coded CA (Latin: cornu ammonis). They contribute to consolidation of information from short-term memory to long-term memory. The brain structure may resemble the horns of the Egyptian god Ammon. He was usually depicted as a ram or a man with a ram's head with curved horns [Budrys 2005, 53, 172].

## 2.3. Arachnoid mater

The arachnoid mater (Latin: arachnoidea) is one of three meninges. It covers the brain and spinal cord in form of a delicate layer. Cerebrospinal fluid flows under the arachnoid mater. The mater has a fine spider web-like appearance and consists of the delicate fibers [Budrys 2005, 53, 173].

Arachne (Greek: Ἀράχνη) was a mortal human being who was an unusually skillful weaver and challenged the goodness Athena into a weaving contest. In one of the versions of the myth, Arachne either won or produced an exceptional textile and as a result Athena's jealousy was transformed by Athena into a spider. In another version of the story, she refused to acknowledge that her skill came from Athena, goddess of crafts and was punished by Athena. Latin name of taxonomical class of spiders is Arachnida.

## 2.4. Atlas

The atlas is the first cervical vertebra of the spine. It is the part of a spinal structure (together with the axis) connecting the skull and spine. It is responsible for the rotation and nodding movements of the head.

Atlas (Greek: Ἀτλας) was a Titan who took part in Titanomachy (an insurrection of Titans against Zeus) and after defeating of Titans, he was

condemned to hold the sky for eternity. He was believed to stand at the western edge of the Earth and some myths associated him with the Atlas Mountains in the Northwest Africa. According to another story, Perseus changed Atlas into a tremendous stone – the Atlas mountains [Grant and Hazel 2000, 53]. It should be mentioned that classical depiction of Atlas shows him holding the celestial spheres. Since late Renaissance when sphericity of the Earth became known, he was depicted as a man holding the globe.

### **2.5. Cupid's bow**

Eros (Greek: Ερως) was the Greek god of love. His Roman equivalent was Cupid. He was depicted as a winged boy with a bow. The Cupid bow is a facial feature. The shape of the upper lip resembles the bow. There is also another “cupid's bow” in the human body. In radiographic x-ray frontal projection, the inferior end plates of the lower lumbar vertebrae form a curved contour known as “the Cupid's bow” [Dietz and Christensen 1976, 121, 577-579].

### **2.6. Erogenous zones**

Erogenous zones are areas of the human body characterized by enhanced sensitivity to sexual stimulation. The mythonym originates from Greek god Eros (see: Cupid).

### **2.7. Hippocampus**

The hippocampus is a part of the human brain located under the cerebral cortex. The main part of the hippocampus (so-called hippocampus proper) is also termed the Ammon's horn. The hippocampus is responsible for memory and orientation. The hippocampus (or hippocamp) (Greek: Ιηπόκαμπος) or sea-horse or sea-monster is a mythological creature depicted as having the upper body of a horse with lower body of a fish. Hippocampus is also a name of more than 50 species of small marine fish.

### **2.8. Hymen**

The hymen is a membrane that surrounds or partially covers the external vaginal opening. The names Hymen, Hymenaios or Hymenaeus originally designated a bridal song, which was subsequently personified. Hymen

(Greek: Ὑμῆν) (also: Hymenaios or Hymenaeus) was the male god of marriage ceremonies, inspiring song and feast. The song belonged to a hymenaios, a genre of erotic poetry in ancient Greece, consisted of poems sung during the procession of the bride's train as she was escorted to the house of groom.

### **2.9. Iris**

Iris is a circular structure of the eye, it is a part of vascular ocular membrane controlling the diameter and size of the pupil and thus the amount of light reaching the retina. The word iris is derived from the Greek goddess of the rainbow. Iris (Greek: Ἴρις = rainbow) was the messenger of the Olympian Gods because she was able to stretch a bow between the sky and the Earth, the rainbow. Additionally, she was believed to replenish the rain-clouds with water with her pitcher from the sea. Iris was depicted as a beautiful young maiden with gold wings. Her dress was shiny with seven colors of the rainbow.

### **2.10. Mons Venus, mons Veneri**

The mons Venus or mons Veneris is a rounded mass known as mons pubic located over the pubic bones. Venus (or Venera) was the Roman goddess of love, sex, beauty, fertility and victory. Her Greek counterpart was Aphrodite.

## **3. Physiological mythonyms**

Only six mythonyms refer to physiological, biochemical or pharmacological terminology. They are summarized in table 1.

### **3.1. Chimerism**

Chimerism or chimera is a single organism composed of cells from two or more different zygotes. In humans, a common form of the chimerism is a fetomaternal microchimerism. In such individuals, fetal cells pass through the placenta and grow as cell lines within the mother. According to Greek mythology chimera or chimaera (Greek: Χίμαιρα) was a fire-breathing monster composed of the parts of more than one animal, e.g. lion, goat, and snake as a one creature.

### 3.2. Chimeric proteins

Chimeric proteins are proteins obtained with bioengineering technology and coded in part by gene of one animal and in remaining part by a gene of other animal. Such proteins are used as biological drugs (e.g. infliximab, a monoclonal antibody is coded by human gene in 75% and mouse gene in 25%).

### 3.3. Janus kinase

Janus kinases are intracellular enzymes with activity of tyrosine kinases that transduce cytokine-mediated signals from the cell-membrane receptors via the JAK-STAT pathways. The kinases possess two near-identical phosphate-transferring domains. The domains have opposite function. One domain exhibits the kinase activity, while the other negatively regulates the kinase activity of the first. Janus (Latin: Ianus) was the Roman god of gates, transitions, and passages as well as beginnings and endings. He was depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past.

### 3.4. Klotho protein<sup>1</sup>

Klotho protein is a membrane protein with enzymatic activity. It is suggested that overexpressing of the Klotho protein is associated with longer life. Klotho (or Clotho = spinner) (Greek: Κλωθώ) was one of Three Fates, or Moirai, goddesses controlling the length of human life. She was responsible for spinning the tread of human life.

### 3.5. Lymph

Lymph is a fluid which circulates within the lymphatic vessels. It is produced in the interstices of the tissues. The term “lymph” is related to the nymphs (Greek: νύμφη), minor female nature deities associated with springs and streams. The exact relation between the medical term and mythological deities remains unclear. Latin Roman poets identified Greek nymphs with Lymphae, water-goddesses. The relation of nymphs and Lymphae is also uncertain, and may be resulted from similarity of the name. Lymphae probably were called earlier Lumpae. Nevertheless, the physiological fluid, lymph originated its name from spring goddess, either ancient Greek nymph or the

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Professor Andrzej Więcek for adding the Klotho protein to my list of mythonyms.

Roman and later Italian goddess Lympha. Another term directly originated from nymphs is nymphomania, classified as mythonym within a group related to psychiatry and psychology, and described later.

### **3.6. Panaceum**

The panacea (panaceum) is a hypothetical medicine which is able to cure all disorders. In modern literature, the terms nostrum or snake oil are used with the same meaning. Panacea (Greek: Πανάκεια) was a daughter of Asclepius and the goddess of universal health. She had a poultice (cataplasm) and potion, magical medicine.

## **4. Pathological mythonyms**

The group of mythonyms described within a class termed “pathology mythonyms” includes various forms of disorders, signs or teratological (congenital) abnormalities. This indicates use of the word “pathological” in broader sense, similar to term “morbid” instead of narrow meaning of the word “pathology” as knowledge of morphological changes resulting from various disorders. Pathological mythonyms are listed in Table 1.

### **4.1. Cyclopia**

Cyclopia (also known as cyclocephaly) is a rare form of a congenital disorder characterized by impaired face development and occurrence of a structure resembling one eye. Most of such fetuses are naturally aborted. Cyclops (Greek: Κύκλωπες), in Greek mythology were giants, with a single eye in the center of the forehead. [Karenberg 2012-2013, 6-7, 17-18].

### **4.2. Gigantism**

Gigantism is a disease characterized by excessive growth caused by over-production of growth hormone in childhood, when an excess of the hormone occurs before calcification of the epiphyseal plates. Over-production of growth hormone is usually resulted from a secreting tumor of the pituitary gland. In mature age, there is no opportunity for proportional growth of the body and acromegaly develops instead gigantism. Gigants or giants (Greek: Γίγαντες)

were a race of mythological creatures of great strength. They were aggressive creatures and carried out a battle with the Olympian gods.

### **4.3. Hermaphrodite**

A hermaphrodite is an organism with reproductive organs of both male and female. Hemaphroditus (Greek: Ερμαφρόδιτος) was a son of Hermes and Aphrodite (his name is compounded of these names) [Karenberg 2012-2013, 6-7, 19-20]. He was born as a handsome boy, and the water nymph Salmacis fell in love with him, and wanted to unite with him forever. In answer to her prayers, she was merged with him, transformed to an individual with male and female features.

### **4.4. Caput medusae**

The caput medusae is the appearance of the distended superficial epigastric veins, radiating from the umbilicus on the surface of the abdomen. It is caused by portal hypertension (e.g. in patients with cirrhosis of the liver). The sign is also known as palm tree sign. Medusa in Greek mythology was a pre-Olympic goddess, the youngest of three Gorgon sisters. Medusa was the only mortal Gorgon. Some ancient authors state that the Gorgons (Medusa, Stheno and Euryale) were children of the ancient marine deities, Phorcys (Phorcys) and his sister Keto (Ceto) [Grant and Hazel 2000, 153]. Like their parents, the Gorgons were monsters. Medusa was depicted as a winged female with a hideous face and venomous snakes in place of hair. Medusa was beheaded by Perseus, the hero and her head was placed by Athena on her shield. Medusa turned onlookers to stone and the shield with the head retained this ability and was a powerful Athena's weapon.

### **4.5. Minerva jacket**

A Minerva jacket is a plaster of Paris cast incorporating the head and trunk applied to the patients with fracture of the cervical spine. Minerva was the Roman mythological goddess of poetry, medicine, craft, commerce and wisdom. She was born with weapons. She is usually considered as equal with the Greek goddess Athena, and she is depicted in a suit of armor.



#### 4.6. Proteus syndrome

Proteus syndrome (synonym: Wiedemann syndrome) is a rare disorder associated with cutaneous overgrowth, atypical bone development and tumors over the body. The course of the disease is highly variable. Proteus (Greek: Πρωτεύς) was the shape-changing sea-god whose symbolized the constantly changing nature of the sea.

#### 4.7. Satyr ears

The Satyr ears is an inborn abnormality characterized by abnormal ears, the auricle lacks of rolled contour. Satyr was a mythological male companion of the Greek god Pan. The satyrs lived in groups and were goat-like features. In Roman mythology similar creatures were called Fauns.

### 5. Psychiatric and psychological mythonyms

#### 5.1. Electra complex

Electra complex in psychology means a girl's competition with her mother for possession of the father. It is an analogy to Oedipus complex in boys (see below). Electra (Greek: Ηλέκτρα) was the daughter of King Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra. She plotted revenge against her mother for the murder of her father [Athanasiadis 1997, 21, 782].

#### 5.2. Oedipus complex

Oedipus (or Oedipal) complex in psychoanalytic theory is a child's desire to have sexual relations with the parent of the opposite sex. Oedipus (Greek: Οιδίπους) was a mythical king of Thebes. The prophecy informed his father that his son would kill his father that is why the baby was left in mountains to die. Oedipus was found by shepherds and raised by another royal family as their own son. Oedipus did not know his true parents. Once he met an old man and quarreled with him. In rage, he killed the stranger, without knowing that he killed his own father. Later still unaware of this fact, he married his mother. Years later, he realized that he killed Laius, his father. His mother realized that she married her son and murder of her husband, and she committed suicide. In despair, Oedipus blinded himself.

### **5.3. Narcissism**

Narcissism is the pursuit of gratification from egotistic admiration of one's own attributes. Narcissism is a concept in psychoanalytic theory and narcissistic personality disorder can be diagnosed. Narcissus (Greek: Νάρκισσος) was known for his beauty. When he saw his reflection in the water he fell in love with it, not realizing it was only his imagine. He was staring at his reflection until he died.

### **5.4. Nymphomania**

Nymphomania is a clinical diagnosis of hypersexuality, also called satyriasis. It is characterized by frequent and/or suddenly increased sexual urges or sexual activity. The term originated from mythological Nymph or Satyr (see earlier).

### **5.5. Ondine curse**

Ondine's curse or central hypoventilation syndrome is a disorder that results in a life-threatening respiratory arrest during sleep. It is caused by an inborn or acquired damage to the brainstem resulting in impaired generation of nervous stimuli of respiration. The disease was described in 1962, and was named after a popular story of Ondine.

Ondine was a water nymph known in European folk tales. She is a character of the play written by Jean Giraudox based on the short-story of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. Ondine fell in love and married Hans, and decided that if he Hans ever deceives her, he would die. When Hans was reunited with his first love Bertha, Ondine punished him by depriving him of ability to breathe without his will. Hans and Ondine kissed, after which he died due to forgetting to breathe [Budrys 2005, 53, 174].

### **5.6. Panic**

Panic is a sudden sensation of fear. It may occur in some psychiatric disorders. Pan (Greek: Πάν) was the god of nature, shepherds, flocks. He was a companion of the nymphs. Ancient Greeks believed that generally peaceful god Pan when accidentally awakened from his nap was giving a loud shout that scared animals and humans.

### 5.7. Satyriasis

Satyriasis is a synonym for nymphomania (see: lymph and satyr ears).

### 5.8. Ulysses syndrome

Ulysses is a Latin name of a Greek mythological king of Ithaca known under a Greek name Odysseus (Greek: Οδυσσεύς), the main hero of Homer's "Odyssey". He spent ten years to return home after the Trojan War. His travel adventures were described in Odyssey. Ulysses syndrome is a set of chronic psychosocial symptoms resulting from a long-lasting stress in involuntary emigrants [Veisrub 1972, 220, 724].

## 6. Mythonyms referring to medical specialties

### 6.1. Hygiene

Hygiene is both a branch medical knowledge also known as environmental health and a set of practices for preservation of health. Hygieia (Greek: Υγιεία) in Greek and Roman mythology was the goddess (also a personification) of health, cleanliness and sanitation. She was a daughter of Asclepius (Esculap). She was worshiped in many Aslepieions, temples of Asclepius.

### 6.2. Venerology

Venerology is a branch of medicine dealing with the study and treatment of sexually transmitted disease. Its name is derived from Venera (or Venus) see chapter 2.10.

## 7. Discussion

The presented paper describes about 30 medical mythonyms that are currently in use both in scientific literature and everyday clinical practice. This is a very small portion of all medical eponyms but their coining and relationship to a medical object is in many cases complex and interesting.

It is important to remember that medical eponyms were coined several centuries after decline of Greek or Roman mythology as religion. It is well known that one of the main features of Renaissance was a return to classical

themes. Renaissance anatomical research preceded in many cases, for a few centuries, understanding of the function of the newly described structures. This was a reason that the anatomists coined names of the structures mostly based on their shape. It was also a fashion to refer with new names to ancient mythological terms. Terms such as hippocampus, Ammon's horn, arachnoidea mater, Cupid's bow, caput medusae, Satyr ears or gigantism clearly refer to shape or size of morphological aspects of the human body, its health or disease.

Life story of mythological gods is related to mythonyms in several cases. Achilles' vulnerable spot was the heel and this phenomenon has explanation in effort of his mother to ensure him immortality. Atlas was a giant who was holding up the sky. In Renaissance, he was depicted as a strong man holding the globe and this depiction might resemble anatomical position and function of the first cervical vertebra which is holding up the head. Iris was the goddess represented by rainbow, associated with a number of colors. It is easily to understand why her name was used to give the name to the multicolored part of the eye. The male god Hymen accompanied marriage ceremonies and his name was given to anatomical sign of virginity. It is of interest that until the 18th century the term "hymen" also described the labia minor of the external female sexual organs [Karenberg 2012-2013, 6-7, 13].

Lymph was commonly believed to originate from the general name of mythological creatures existing in springs or lakes, the nymphs. It is true but the coining of the name "lymph" was much more complex than a switch of the term "nymph" to "lymph". Italian folk tradition and fairy tales contain creatures which are equivalent to Greek Nymphs termed "Lymphae". This old-Italian or even late ancient Latin term was the origin of the name of body fluid circulating within the lymphatic system. The story of Ondine, the nymph is an example of revival of mythological themes in modern literature.

Psychiatric or psychological mythonyms were coined in the 19th and 20th centuries. They mostly refer to the fate of mythological gods. For example, Odysseus (known in Roman mythology as Ulysses) travelled home after the Trojan War during ten years. The psychological alterations resulting from stress of migration are known as the Ulysses syndrome.

Summing up, it is difficult to provide a simple explanation of occurrence of relatively numerous mythonyms in modern medical terminology. Some of them were coined in Renaissance and reflected a common interest in Antiquity these days. They became popular in medical terminology, and still are widely used in medical literature. The psychiatric terms referring to Greek mythology appeared in medicine later. Most of them were coined at the turn of the 19th century and early years of the 20th century. The hypothetical explanation of their introduction to the modern medical vocabulary is a very clear description of new discovered clinical events in the myths created more than twenty centuries earlier. Currently, some medical nomenclature committees demonstrate the tendency to eliminate anthroponyms from medical

terminology. Mythonyms which in part are also anthroponyms are not term coined from the names of discoverer or the author of the first description of disease or other medical phenomenon. Thus, the mythonyms avoid the elimination from the current medical vocabulary. One of the reason is lack of association of mythonyms with any modern nations thus mythonyms cannot be considered as preaching of national scientists. Such situation applied to some German physicians who later were found to be involved in the Nazi activity and their names were removed from list of medical eponyms [Woywodt and Matteson 2006, 1303-1306; Kucharz, Majdan and Kotulska 2012, 541-542]. Further studies on medical mythonyms are needed.

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## Summary

### MEDICAL EPONYMS OF MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGIN

Eponyms account for a significant part of medical terminology. Their number is estimated to be a few thousands. Almost all of them are anthroponyms and were coined from names of authors describing a disease, symptom, sign, etc. A small portion of medical eponyms are mythonyms, coined from names of mythological figures or creatures.

Mythonyms are classified into anatomical, physiological, pathological, psychiatric and psychological groups. Two mythonyms describe the name of one medical specialty (hygiene and venereology). Mythonyms were coined from late Renaissance to the 19th century. Their relationship to a mythological figure is usually complex. Anatomical mythonyms are referring shapes of mythological creatures. Other mythonyms refer to stories or special features of mythological figures. The paper reviews more than 30 mythonyms, and describes their medical meaning, mythological origin and possible relation between the mythological figure and eponym.

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