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Bungles of Documentation

Terminology → Nomenclature → Coding → Classification!
The relationships of one facet of medical documentation and
data handling to another are portrayed sequentially, as above.
Similar interrelationships prevail in the fields of fundamental
science and business. Accordingly, certain functions include
data evaluations as in research, planning, and fiscal compensa-
tion. In medicine, the interests encompass determinations
of quality of medical care, notably the effectiveness of diagnos-
tic and therapeutic procedures.

In the midst of apparent agreement, questions are posed:
Are exactitudes altogether essential? Is the insistence on data
composition as important to provider as to recipient? If not,
why be disturbed when computers—like the Campbells—are
coming? For automation per se might resolve intricacies with-
out a touch of the human hand. Whether we cry “Hurray!
Hurray!” will depend on our faith in deus ex machina.

In another light, should we advocate ostrichism—bury our
heads in the sand to avoid the challenge of inexactitudes? Thus,
we might conclude, let the US government and private agen-
cies “hold the bag” and, coincidentally, pay the piper.

A broad issue is at stake. Should we employ plain, un-
adorned, even prosaic language in the midst of medicine’s
greatest advancement—an advancement that calls for accuracy
and preciseness of medical writing and communication?
Should we overlook the fact that the classification of diseases
and procedures for critical study and treatment depends
basically on the use of meaningful language for effective
processing and interpretation? Likewise, should we avoid
the fact that coding will falter without the ingredients of pre-
cise terminology? And finally, is the role of nomenclature
to be misconstrued?

Terminology is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary:
“Etymologically, The doctrine or scientific study of terms; in
use almost always, The system of terms belonging to any
science or subject...” The Century Dictionary and Encylope-
dia reiterates, “The doctrine or science of technical terms;
teaching or theory regarding the proper use of terms.”...

Nomenclature is an extension of any terminology sys-

Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary defines it as the special
terms used in any field, as an art or science. Thus, terminol-
ogy is the forerunner of nomenclature and in turn the basis for
coding mechanisms....

The disease classification system most commonly used
today is the International Classification of Diseases, Adapted
(ICDA). This system came into prominence as Standard
Nomenclature of Diseases and Operations (SNDO) became
unduly complex for use beyond the realm of academic medi-
cine. Indeed, the demands for completeness, specificity, and
logical coding had defeated the very purposes of the system—
literally killed it....

The overall view of classification systems indicates quite
clearly that a given system cannot be all things to all scien-
tists and statisticians. Similarly, a particular coding mech-
ism will fail to reflect the significance of particular items and
relationships involved in the source materials for transmis-
sion, identification, and interpretation.

Experiences in depth indicate that there is no reasonable
eXpectation that a universal system of disease classification,
appropriate for all medical purposes, will be designed. In-
deed, data analysis requires a clear perspective of the provid-
er’s concepts of information as well as the purposes or pro-
gram of the recipients, or both....

The notion that classification is an entity unto itself is like
living in a fools’ paradise. Ascendancy to a higher realm is lost
by failures to realize that classification is essentially the build-
er’s art—his literary building blocks to be arranged in proper
form and sequence. Accordingly, he marks each block by code
or number to assure proper identification in the manner that
different sections of the London Bridge were identified be-
fore transport to Havasu, Ariz. Codes are rubrics, symbols,
identifiers, indicators to be related properly to the data.

Poor terminology, ineffective nomenclature, as with un-
satisfactory coding, are the quicksands—reasons for complexi-
ties, conflicts, and discrepancies—in data handling that follow.
In documentation one cannot live without the other(s).

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