

De Novo All Over Again

One of the peculiarities of scientific writing that make editing it so interesting is the surprising frequency with which authors say the opposite of what they mean. They write of “fluid containing cysts”, for example — disdaining the hyphen that would make their meaning clear — when what they actually mean is “cysts containing fluid”.

Another example of this perverse tendency is the anomalous way most medical writers use the Latin *de novo*, an adverbial phrase included in most English dictionaries that means “anew, again”. Webster’s Unabridged gives the example “a case tried *de novo*”. In medical contexts, however, the phrase is almost always used attributively — that is, to modify not a verb but a noun: “*de novo* coronary-artery lesions”. Since *de novo* means “again”, you might think its intended meaning as an adjective would be “recurrent”, but you would be wrong. Instead, it most often signifies “new”, a meaning that is very close to being the opposite of its dictionary definition.

At least, *de novo* means “new” when applied to coronary-artery lesions. According to Gregory Curfman MD, cardiologists use the phrase to describe a lesion that develops in a new location after bypass surgery or balloon angioplasty has been used to treat

earlier lesions. “It really means ‘arising anew’”, explains Curfman, a cardiologist and a deputy editor at the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In the context of cancer, however, *de novo* usually means something quite different — not “new” but “primary”. “It’s used, for example, to distinguish primary leukemia from leukemia secondary to ionizing radiation or certain drugs”, explains Robert S Schwartz MD, a hematologist who is also a deputy editor at the *New England Journal*. This article title from the journal *Blood* illustrates the point: “HRX Involvement in *De Novo* and Secondary Leukemias with Diverse Chromosome 11q23 Abnormalities”.

Why, then, say *de novo* when you mean simply “new” or “primary”? (Why, for that matter, say “*de novo* resistance to all-trans-retinoic acid” when what you mean is “initial resistance”?) Neither Curfman nor Schwartz said they knew of any good reason to use the more pretentious Latin phrase, and both agreed its use could be confusing. (At least 1 author asked to have an adjectival *de novo* restored to his manuscript — nobody remembers now what it was about — because he in fact did mean “recurrent”.)

Of the half-dozen dictionaries I consulted, only 1 — the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Sec-

ond Edition — recognizes the attributive use of *de novo*. After defining the adverb as “anew, afresh, over again from the beginning”, the OED adds, “Rarely as adj= ‘new, fresh,’ and prefixed to sb [substantive].” It cites this example from an anatomy journal dated 1847-9: “A *de novo* development of such texture.” (Confusingly, Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition, seems to recognize the attributive usage by identifying the phrase as “adv or adj” but then gives only the adverbial definition, “over again, anew”.)

A nonstandard word or phrase sometimes gains a foothold when it meets a clear linguistic need; the use of “hopefully” in place of the stilted “it is to be hoped that” is a controversial example (pitting prescriptive “snobs” against descriptive “slobs”). For the nonstandard use of *de novo* as an adjective, however — frequently to mean very nearly the opposite of its standard definition as an adverb — there seems to be no excuse.

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