SHORT COMMUNICATION

Cockney Rhyming Slang and Medical Terminology

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ABSTRACT

Cockney is an English dialect that is prevalent in the East End of London. An idiosyncratic feature of this dialect is “Cockney rhyming slang”, in which the speaker replaces the words he actually means to say with words or phrases that rhyme with his or her intended words. Pop culture can inspire the introduction of new terms into this informal medical jargon. The authors discuss the role of pop culture in the historical development of medical terms in Cockney rhyming slang, and identify Cockney medical terms that physicians and other healthcare professionals who serve the East End of London may encounter. Int. J. Hist. Philos. Med. 2013; 3: 16-18. ©2013 Biomedicine International, Inc.

Key Words: Culture; England; Music; Slang

INTRODUCTION

The term “Cockney” traditionally refers to any individual born within the sound of the ringing bells of Mary-le-Bow Church in the East End of London¹, and these individuals speak in their own English dialect, the Cockney dialect, from which Cockney rhyming slang developed. The origins of Cockney rhyming slang are obscure. Cockney rhyming slang initially may have been restricted to blue-collar workers, such as seamen and itinerant laborers, who wanted to hide the subject of their conversations from their employers or strangers², or among criminals who wanted to convey information in code.³ However, many blue-collar Londoners employ Cockney rhyming slang presently⁴, and it has been adopted as a humorous way of communication devoid of criminal intent⁵

Rhyme Scheme and Pop Culture

In Cockney rhyming slang, a rhyming word or expression replaces the word that the speaker intends to say.¹² Some of the rhyming expressions are not as readily grasped by speakers who are unfamiliar with the Cockney accent. Furthermore, Cockney rhyming slang is constantly changing². The names of specific celebrities function as slang equivalents. Thus, Cockney rhyming slang incorporates elements of popular culture into its lexicon. For example, an episode of binge drinking that lasts an entire day is called an “all-dayer”. One Cockney rhyming slang equivalent of “all-dayer” is “Leo Sayer”. This term refers to the eponymous British singer-songwriter best known in the United States for his 1976 single “You Make Me Feel Like Dancing”. Younger individuals are likely not as familiar with Leo Sayer, but are more inclined to employ the names of contemporary singers. Among present-day speakers of Cockney rhyming slang, beers may be referred to as “Britney Spears”.

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An important variation of Cockney rhyming slang is “clipped rhyming slang”, in which the rhyming word is left out. For example, the phrase “loaf of bread” is the slang equivalent to head. In clipped rhyming slang, only the word “loaf” is used to refer to the head. Thus, the statement “use your loaf” translates as “use your head”.

Medical Terminology

Medical terms have equivalents in Cockney rhyming slang. The UK Web Archive lists some of these terms, although this list is not comprehensive. Except for the term “on and off”, which refers to cough, all the terms below are listed in the UK Web Archive:

Human Anatomy

Appendix: Jimi Hendrix
Blood: Roy Hudd
Bones: Tom Jones
Heart: strawberry tart, raspberry tart, horse and cart, jam tart
Liver: Swanee River, cheerful giver

Diseases

AIDS: buckets and spades
Cancer: sunny dancer
Crabs (pediculus pubis): Andy McNabs, dibs and dabs, Jim Bob Babs, Sandy McNabs, Doner Kebabs
Gout: salmon and trout, twist and shout, in and out
Gout (joint pains): twist and shout
Hemorrhoids: Emma Freuds, Clement Freuds
Piles (hemorrhoids): Chalfonts St. Giles
Shingles: Mandy Dingles
Thrush: Basil Brush

Drugs and Alcohol

All dayer (all day drinking session): Gary Player or Leo Sayer
Draw (cannabis): Jack McGraw, Jack Straw, Two by Four
Drug: Persian rug, spark plugs, fur rugs, kisses and hugs
Drunk: elephant’s trunk
E (ecstasy): bumblebee
Eighth (of cannabis): Henry the Eighth
Gear (cocaine): Brighton Pier
Half (an ounce of drugs): Rory McGrath
Hangover: Ben Dover
Hash (cannabis): Johnny Cash
Line (cocaine): Patsy Cline
Powder (cocaine): Nicky Lauder
Trip (acid or ecstasy): walnut whip
Weed (cannabis): dog and lead, happy feed

Miscellaneous

Cough: on and off
Diet: Brixton Riot
CONCLUSION

Pop culture has influenced the historical development of an informal medical jargon among speakers of Cockney rhyming slang. Cockney-speaking patients are more likely to discuss their health with physicians and other healthcare providers in less ambiguous terms, especially during medical emergencies. However, if slang is used to refer to conditions or behaviors that a patient does not discuss during the formal medical interview, or that a patient may wish to hide for fear of legal ramifications (e.g., drug abuse), healthcare providers would be at an advantage to know the equivalents of important medical terms in Cockney rhyming slang. Attention to such detail would contribute to the medical and social histories of the Cockney-speaking patient.

REFERENCES