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Brenda R. Pfannenstiel MALS, MA, AHIP
Children's Mercy Kansas City

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Recommended Citation

Pfannenstiel, B. R. "Famous Persons" in MEDLINE: Examination of a Medical Subject Heading *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, Spring 1998; 17(1):11-23. 17, 11-23 (1998).

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**"Famous Persons" in MEDLINE:
Examination of a Medical Subject Heading**

Brenda R. Pfannenstiel

ABSTRACT

The "famous persons" Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) provides a unique perspective on the medical literature indexed in the Medline database. 3,745 Medline citations indexed with the term "famous persons" from 1966 through 1994 were examined. Discussions of possible diagnoses of creative artists, royalty, political leaders, and even fictional characters were a frequent preoccupation, as were assassinations. Publication dates of articles concerning a particular famous person are often clustered around an anniversary of the person's birth or death. A few famous persons account for a disproportionate number of citations.

Brenda R. Pfannenstiel, MALS, MA
Clinical Medical Librarian
School of Medicine
University of Missouri-Kansas City
2411 Holmes
Kansas City, MO 64108
pfannenstiel@cctr.umkc.edu

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Examination of a Medical Subject Heading**

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

What sorts of articles are indexed with the term "famous persons," and what do they tell us about the preoccupations of the medical literature? We might begin by considering its use compared with the use of the publication type "Historical Biography." "Historical Biography" is intended for "physicians and scientists closely related to or contributing to the field of medicine," or "for medical aspects or medical notes on famous persons who were not physicians or scientists," and is used approximately nine times as often as the term "famous persons," while the "historical biography" term is used to index roughly 82% of all "famous persons" articles. Biographical notes on physicians and scientists, according to the MEDLARS Indexing Manual 17.2.5¹, are not to be routinely indexed under the heading "famous person."

3,745 Medline citations indexed with the term "famous persons" from 1966 through 1994 were examined. "Famous persons" was a major descriptor in 3,185 citations (85%), a minor descriptor in 560 citations. As a rule (17.2.8)² no "history" subheading should be attached to "famous persons," but twenty-one citations did have the subheading history, fourteen starred and seven unstarred.

Sixty-four percent of the citations are in English (2,393); the next most prolific publishers of articles about famous persons wrote in German (8%), Russian (7%), and French (6%). Most of the Russian articles appear to be reverent, almost sycophantic celebrations of Lenin's contributions to public health, although a few other Soviet leaders are similarly celebrated, usually in anniversary years. In all, twenty-five languages are represented.

Approximately five percent of the articles concern scientists or physicians and their discoveries, medical or otherwise. Not surprisingly, Darwin is a

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favorite subject, for his own ill health even more than for his contributions to science. Copernicus was the subject of about a dozen articles in 1973 (the 500th anniversary of his birth), and about as many more in the years before, but has attracted very little attention in Medline-indexed journals since.

Anniversaries of births, deaths, discoveries, and other celebrated events often inspire articles in a particular year, but there are a few persons in whom interest has been continual, just as there are broad subjects that recur throughout the years of the Medline database. Leonardo da Vinci has been an enduring subject of interest, both as an artist and as a scientist. This interest has resulted in three dozen articles, extending even to a discussion of Bell's palsy as the etiology of Mona Lisa's mysterious and beguiling smile!
(89165120)³

ARTISTS

About six percent of the citations are about artists, seven percent about musicians and composers, and seventeen percent about writers. Most of the articles about artists or writers fall into two groups; the health of the artist or writer, or the medical knowledge revealed in the art or the written work. Art is also used to provide evidence for a diagnosis of its subject, as in the case of the Mona Lisa and in portraits of Galileo Galilei and Lorenzo de Medici. These articles can be found by coordinating the MeSH terms "famous persons" and "portraits." Among portraits, the painting of Dr. Gachet by his patient, Vincent van Gogh, inspired no less than four articles. Surely this is the most valuable fee a patient ever paid a doctor, although the full value was realized long after the deaths of both parties.

A number of articles address the vision, particularly the color vision, of painters and discuss whether vision disorders affected their art. "Color," "color

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perception," or "color vision defects" were used as index terms in nine articles. For example, Goya's vision attracted some speculation. "Dyschromatopsis and pictorial art" (92138900)⁴ discussed several artists, but van Gogh's eyesight, particularly as concerned his yellow palette was the subject of at least a half-dozen articles. Toulouse-Lautrec was the subject of eight articles; Rembrandt, Mary Cassatt, and others were addressed in more than one article, but van Gogh consistently received the most attention in every decade. Interest has been particularly strong in the nineties with twenty-two articles so far. Almost all of them represent that popular sport of physicians: diagnosing a non-patient without his consent.

Speculation has been rampant on the nature of van Gogh's medical problems, which include such eye disorders as colorblindness, glaucoma, xanthopsia, and effects of digitalis toxicity. Van Gogh also suffered from unspecified mental disorders, or epilepsy, or bipolar disorder, or adjustment disorder, or Meniere's disease, or terpenes toxicity, or acute intermittent porphyria, or an identity crisis, or perhaps he was stigmatized by the circumstances of his birth. Or perhaps not. Dr. Wilfred Arnold has argued the terpene toxicity theory lengthily and quite persuasively in Vincent van Gogh: chemicals, crises, and creativity (Boston: Birkhauser, 1992); it remains to be seen whether speculation will continue, with as yet unanticipated arguments to be made.

WRITERS AND FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

The favorite writers to come under discussion in the medical literature appear to be Chekhov, Shakespeare, Doyle, and Dickens. Chekhov is the subject of at least thirty articles; apparently he attracted the interest of so many authors in medical journals because he was a physician as well as a highly

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regarded creative writer, and he addressed so many issues of illness and the doctor-patient relationship in his art. Other physicians better-known as writers include Keats and Maugham, each of whom inspired several articles.

Shakespeare's knowledge of medicine and portrayal of physicians attracted more attention in the sixties and seventies than in the last two decades.

Dickens was more interesting to writers in medical journals for his portrayal of characters than for the state of his own health. Four citations addressed Tiny Tim of The Christmas Carol and renal tubular acidosis.

Dickens' portrayal of aged characters had an appreciative review in "Charles Dickens' old people" (80093662)⁵; his epileptics were pondered in a 1994 article published in Epilepsia (94364324)⁶.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the subject of eight articles but his creation, Sherlock Holmes, was the subject of an additional eight. Sherlock Holmes is the fictional character who appears most among Medline citations indexed with the term "famous persons," but there are others. In addition to Tiny Tim, the fate of Gene Forrester in John Knowles' A Separate Peace was considered in (75143692)⁷, Goethe's Otilie was the subject of an article on anorexia nervosa (91012471)⁸, and Quasimodo's deformity came under discussion in 1985 and again in 1990 (86104947) and (92063184)⁹. Characters from novels, plays, opera, poetry, and ancient mythology are represented among the "famous persons" articles in Medline.

In some cases not just individual characters but a writer's work as a whole is identified with a disease process, as in "Dental pain in the life and writings of Hans Christian Andersen" (89088631)¹⁰. "The cricket and the marionette" (82108021)¹¹ identifies Pinocchio as a story about asthma, while another classic story is dissected in "'Poe-phyria,' madness, and The Fall of the House of Usher." (89111214)¹²

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When medical journal authors aren't diagnosing the physical ailments of writers and/or their fictional characters, the writers are psychoanalyzed. Female writers appear to be favorite subjects of psychobiographers; among poets Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson are favored with this attention, while Virginia Woolf is the most-analyzed female novelist.

MUSICIANS AND COMPOSERS

Seven percent of the citations indexed to famous persons are about musicians and composers from Brahms to Elvis, but two composers of enduring interest to the medical community are Beethoven, with forty-nine articles, and Mozart, with sixty-five. Just as van Gogh's variable state of health proved such a diagnostic puzzle, the etiology of Beethoven's deafness and the mysterious illness and death of Mozart have provided much speculative material. Even the appearance of Mozart's ears in portraits has provided grist for the diagnostic mill. (87129995, 87158192)¹³ (Portraits can be an embarrassing legacy for the celebrated; consider "John Jay's pimple: a medical puzzle" (78109885)¹⁴ . . .or perhaps you'd rather not.)

After Mozart and Beethoven, Chopin's illness and Paganini's supposed Marfan's syndrome have spawned the most articles; more recently dead musicians rarely appear but Elvis Presley's autopsy and Kurt Cobain's suicide were recorded in Medline.

CREATIVITY

In a broader sense, artists, musicians, and writers have long interested the medical community for what their lives tell us about the sources of creativity, and the possible relationship between physical or mental illness and creative ability or expression. Among "famous persons" citations, fifty-seven are indexed

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to the MeSH "creativity." This interest is not confined to physicians and psychiatrists; for those who wish to explore the subject in depth, there are three recent books that address the question of creativity: The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy by Arnold Ludwig (1995, Guilford Press), Discovering by Robert S. Root Bernstein (1989, Harvard University Press), and Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament by Kay R. Jamison (1993, Free Press). For his part, Ludwig argues that truly great creative achievers usually experience a life-threatening illness or physical disability early in life, which may give them "a heightened sense of urgency to leave a mark on the world and achieve immortality."¹⁵ Great achievers may also relieve a restless, driven state of psychological unease through creative problem solving. These two characteristics, among others, are attributed to the most innovative of scientists, business and political leaders, and explorers, as well as to creative artists, and could easily excite the continued interest of medical writers in the creativity of famous persons, with further citations to be consequently added to Medline.

EXPLORERS

Explorers have merited an occasional article in indexed journals; how Livingstone extracted his own teeth merited two articles.¹⁶ (70112376, 68087165) Cook, Columbus, and Alexander von Humboldt also inspired articles; exploration also raises the significant issue of transmission of infectious diseases to new and non-resistant populations, and also the physical effects of travel, but these questions cannot be reliably associated with the "famous persons" term in the medical literature.

ASSASSINATION

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Another recurring interest in the medical community is the assassination of political leaders. Medline has not gone untouched by conspiracy theories surrounding the "grassy knoll" in Dallas. Eighty-five citations are about assassinations and famous persons; fifty-two specifically concern John F. Kennedy. In addition to the forensic evidence surrounding President Kennedy's death, a number of articles concern the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald and of Jack Ruby, and the psychological effect of the assassination itself and of the Warren Commission's report on Americans. Other victims of assassination or attempted assassination discussed in the medical literature are Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Roosevelt, Jackson and Reagan; Robert Kennedy, Governors Wallace and Connally, Martin Luther King, Shigenobu Okuma, President Sadi Carnot, Huey P. Long, Steve Biko, and Reinhard Heydrich.

POLITICAL LEADERS

The illnesses of political leaders, with the potential effects on the people and government they lead, is another subject that recurs throughout the years of Medline citations.¹⁷ Approximately fourteen percent of the famous persons citations concern the health of political leaders; these include fifty-seven articles about the Kennedys, fifty articles about the Napoleons, twenty-three about Abraham Lincoln and thirty-four about Hitler. In addition to the articles about Hitler, more than a dozen concern other individual Nazis, or Nazis and Nazism in general.

The dental problems of Presidents are a popular topic, starting with George Washington's dentures, which have been the subject of fourteen articles, including one about the theft of his dentures from the Smithsonian (83162023)¹⁸. The dental health of other U. S. Presidents has also provided material for dental journals; Thomas Jefferson claimed to have had good teeth

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(84213648)¹⁹. Tooth extractions and the oral health of royalty interested several authors. Paleodontology ensures that even mummies can get their teeth cleaned and professionally examined (68158508)²⁰. Hitler's teeth were the subject of one article.²¹(69233364)

ROYALTY

Many of the articles about female "famous persons" concern the gynecological and obstetrical problems of royalty, such as a 1967 article with an unfortunate title: "A gynaecologist looks at the Tudors." (67215796)²². Obstetrical complications due to hemophilia or porphyria in royal families were the subject of a few articles (92269663, 92330764, 69293548)²³. Did Elizabeth I suffer from PMS?²⁴ (86174514) An article written the same year argued that Elizabeth I in fact had testicular feminization, and proposed a diagnosis of male pseudo-hermaphroditism.²⁵ (86013705)

Among royalty, King George III is a favorite subject, coinciding with several favorite royal diagnoses: insanity, syphilis, and porphyria. The Hapsburg jaw is the inspiration for nine Medline citations, hemophilia for twelve citations, Richard III's deformities for seven citations, Tutankhamen's gynecomastia for two citations. In 1985 Mary, Queen of Scots was given the fashionable diagnosis of anorexia nervosa (86151641)²⁶. Robert the Bruce, King of Scots, was thought by some to have had leprosy.²⁷ (89178328, 78248588).

The Sun King's rectal fistulas inspired four articles, while the neurosyphilis of Lord Randolph Churchill (84119130)²⁸, President Carter's hemorrhoids (79134874)²⁹ and Woodrow Wilson's urination disorders (81058227)³⁰ have all come under public discussion in the medical literature. Fame, it seems, has its price.

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LEADERSHIP AND MENTAL HEALTH

On the psychiatric front, a number of articles address the sanity of famous leaders. Cleopatra's psychiatric assessment was undertaken in 1990 (91117752)³¹, although the credibility of an assessment made at such a cultural and temporal remove from the "patient" based on whatever evidence survived the millenia has to be suspect. More contemporary articles include a discussion of Nixon's possible psychosis (81093167)³², while Mrs. Thatcher's name appears in an article on dementia (86104940)³³.

Gandhi attracted the psychologists and psychiatrists; most interesting is a comparative psychoanalytic study of Gandhi and Hitler! ³⁴(81199918) Religious leaders infrequently inspired articles in medical journals; the fabled first blood transfusion was to a Pope ³⁵(92330195). In 1969 the speculated mental disorders of Mohammed were discussed in Medizinische Welt ³⁶(69205273) which raises the question: could a similar article earn the author a Rushdie-style death sentence today? Joan of Arc was the subject of an article on epilepsy ³⁷(92076961) while Rev. Jones inspired a discussion of paranoia, suicide, and mass behavior.³⁸ (80015339, 80015338, 81127409) Interestingly, articles about George Armstrong Custer at Little Big Horn debated the possibility of mass suicide as well (84009636, 84266734)³⁹.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS

In all there are seven articles about one or another Pope, but as a 1982 BMJ article illustrates (82207670)⁴⁰, the medical subject of an article does not necessarily concern the famous person indexed. In this article, the medical discussion concerns the woman who died in the crowd awaiting the Pope's visit. The article is check-tagged female, for the (not famous) dead woman, but

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not check-tagged male for the Pope. Several "famous person" citations concern Jesus, notably "The crucifixion and death of a man called Jesus"⁴¹(89216894) and "Jesus' agony. A pain researcher studies Jesus' dying."⁴²(94285519)

FAMOUS FEMALE PERSONS

Fewer than eight percent of the citations indexed with the term "famous persons" concern women. Of these, many concern the obstetric histories of rulers or rulers' wives, particularly Queen Anne. A few women are memorialized for their contributions to science or medicine, such as Margaret Mead (73061448)⁴³, Irene Curie ⁴⁴(74088459) and especially Marie Curie (in six citations). Saint Apollonia is a favorite of the dental journals, appearing in eighteen citations. A few well-known women in dentistry, nursing, and medical illustration receive tributes in the medical literature.

Psychological portraits are attempted for Mary Todd Lincoln (66061780)⁴⁵, Camille Claudel (94106856)⁴⁶, and Mary Cassatt (87290286)⁴⁷, among others. Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and the Brontes were popular literary figures in medical journals, but even fictional female characters could attract the diagnostic skills of medical authors, as in "Tolstoy's description of Tourette syndrome in Anna Karenina."⁴⁸ (95122992)

THE VIP AND THE PUBLIC

An interesting subset of articles indexed to the "famous persons" term concerns the VIP as hospitalized patient, the subject of articles such as "A star-struck service: impact of the admission of a celebrity to an inpatient unit,"⁴⁹ (79048320) and "What to say (and not to say) when reporters ask questions."⁵⁰ (82196087) A related type of article is "The impact of media coverage of Nancy Reagan's experience on breast cancer screening."⁵¹ (90053925) No fewer

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than eleven citations concerning Magic Johnson's HIV positive status and its influence on HIV testing and education appeared in journals indexed in Medline 1992-94.

ODDS AND ENDS

Related to the enduring interest in assassinations of famous persons are the articles about assassins and other well-known criminals or alleged criminals, such as Jack the Ripper (82065392)⁵², John Wesley Hardin (87296546)⁵³, Joan Harris (89082223)⁵⁴ or O. J. Simpson (94353221)⁵⁵. Spoonerisms were the subject of two articles; Baron Munchausen appeared in three.

Some especially intriguing titles among the "famous persons" articles indexed in Medline illustrate how wide-ranging the interests of medical journals can be: "Rehnquist's drug dependence poses dilemma,"⁵⁶ (82129109) "Paraplegic Viking and the one-armed pianist--some well known persons with locomotor disability,"⁵⁷ (84196261), "Early failure of the famous,"⁵⁸ (87146796) "Thoreau's natural pollinometers,"⁵⁹ (88158231) "Disease and ability: the gifted and the damned,"⁶⁰ (80101129), "Surgery in wounds caused by the horns of bulls,"⁶¹ (85172512) "Mental disorders in the Bible and Talmud,"⁶² (76068330) "Enlightened views on freckles and dandruff." ⁶³(78255509) In addition, dozens of articles concern the physicians and dentists of famous persons.

CONCLUSION

The Medical Subject Heading "famous persons" offers a unique perspective on the body of medical literature cited in the Medline database. The citations indexed with this term, though an extremely small percentage of the total number of Medline citations, illuminate the physician's viewpoint on

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history, art, and celebrity in a way that the vast number of medical journal articles do not, and incidentally make for fascinating reading.

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