

Influenza, *krimfarang* and A(H1N1)pdm09

The outbreak of the influenza epidemic in 2009 caused disagreement over many things, including what to call the disease. Mexican flu, novel influenza, influenza A(H1N1) and several others were proposed, but the term 'swine flu' prevailed, and was appointed Word of the Year in Norway.

The name «influenza» originated in Italy, hence the spelling with a *z*. It is derived from the Latin *influentia*, meaning influence, impact. At its root lies the Latin verb *influer*, which in Latin has the specific sense «to flow in, to stream into». This usage is related to how medieval astrologers claimed that a liquid flowed from the stars and the other celestial bodies down to Earth to influence the life of humans and the ways of the world (1).

Krimfarang and common colds

In the sense of «contagion, infection», influenza has been known in Italy since the early 16th century, but the term increased in usage only after an epidemic in that country in 1743 (2, 3). German and English adopted the Italian spelling *influenza*, and so did Danish and Norwegian. The term debuted in our languages in the early 19th century, but did not come into widespread use until the 20th (1). Following the spelling reform of 1907, Norwegians started writing *influenza* with an *s* (4), although several years would pass before this form of writing gained full acceptance (5). The Danes still stick to the *z*.

In Norwegian, *influenza* is thus a loanword. It is common for such words to be adapted to the language into which they are loaned. In the *Norsk Ordbok* [*Dictionary of Norwegian*], we find a number of local variants: From Klæbu (Sør-Trøndelag County) we find *innflæns*, from Valdres *innfluense* and *innfruense*, from Modum

(Buskerud County) *innfeleensa* and from Stor-Elvdal (in the Østerdalen valley) *florensa*. In Western Norway we find *flunse* and *flonse* (6).

The indefatigable language reformer Knud Knudsen (1812–95) wanted to replace the foreign word *influenza* with something more Norwegian. He suggested *krimfarang*, *omgangssnue*, *forkjølelsesfeber* and *grippe* (7), but none of these caught on. *Krimfarang* is my personal favourite. It is composed of *krim* = common cold, coryza, and *farang* = local epidemic, i.e. a common-cold epidemic. This corresponds to the popular use of the word *influenza*, a severe case of the common cold (8).

An important argument over words

Influenza is not one, but three diseases: seasonal flu, pandemic flu and bird flu (9). When swine flu struck in 2009, an argument erupted, including with regard to terminology (10, 11). Was this a pandemic or not? And what should the disease be called?

Some of the influenza epidemics have been given specific names: the Russian disease (1889), the Spanish flu (1918), the Asian flu (1957), the Hong Kong flu (1968) and the Russian flu (1977). The term swine flu was all but unknown to the public until the end of April 2009, but then suddenly things took off. During the remaining months of that year, the word was used more than 8 500 times in Norwegian newspapers, and at the end of the year it was selected as Word of the Year (12). However, the pig farmers of the world raised their hackles, and Yakov Litzman, Deputy Minister of Health in Israel, for religious reasons chose to use the term Mexican flu (13). Even though the name Mexican flu could fit well with the names for previous flu epidemics, this did not represent an optimal solution, both in terms of the stigmatisation involved and the uncertainty as to whether the virus really originated in Mexico (14). Some suggested «novel influenza» (13, 15), while the health authorities referred to it as «influenza A(H1N1)» and «pandemic influenza» and were criticised for doing so (16). A Norwegian researcher suggested that we ought to do like the meteorologists, who have a list of names for tropical cyclones. Thus they know in advance what to call the next one (17).

And then? In October 2011 the WHO came to its conclusion. They have decided that the

official name will be A(H1N1)pdm09. We may not have heard the last word on this.

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