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The problem with “pruritis”: A retrospective study characterizing the misspelling of selected dermatologic terms in the medical literature, as indexed in an electronic medical database

Julia Lehman, MD, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, United States

Background: Misspelling of certain dermatologic terms occurs commonly in the medical literature, is perpetuated by standard spell-checking software, and could lead to omission of affected articles in literature searches.

Objective: To identify risk factors for misspelling of dermatologic terms in the title and abstract of articles indexed in an electronic medical database.

Methods: PubMed was used to search for the following search terms: “pruritus” and “pruritis”; “nevus sebaceus” and “nevus sebaceous”; “lichen sclerosus” and “lichen sclerosis”; and “Mohs” and “Moh’s”. Journal and author characteristics were recorded and analyzed.

Results: Of all articles with titles and abstracts containing the inaccurate terms “pruritis”, “nevus sebaceous”, “lichen sclerosis”, and “Moh’s”, between 85.7 and 100% would have been missed using a strict search with correctly spelled terms. Publication in non-dermatology journals and author origin from a country with English as an official language were statistically significant risk factors for misspelling of certain search terms. Journal impact factor was not correlated with risk for such spelling errors.

Limitations: Medical terms with several acceptable spelling variations (e.g. “nevus” and “naevus”) were not investigated.

Conclusion: Authors (particularly those from English-speaking countries), copy editors (particularly those of non-dermatology journals), and database indexers should be aware of dermatologic terms prone to misspelling so that works are not omitted inadvertently from literature searches. Searchers of the literature may optimize search sensitivity by entering several spelling variations or avoiding the use of quotation marks around search terms.

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