Letters

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Medical Terminology

The article by Kijowski and De Smet [1] on MRI of the elbow, describing findings of osteochondritis, is well written and nicely illustrated.

A minor, but not trivial, point is the use of the word “capitellum” to indicate the site of the abnormality in the distal humerus. Some radiology texts and anatomy books seem to interchange the words capitulum and capitellum for this part of the distal humerus. The Latin suffixes -ulum and -ellum do have similar meanings—small and little, respectively [2]. A problem arises when other radiology texts and anatomy books use the word capitellum to indicate the epiphysis of the radial head. No single radiology text or anatomy book can claim to be the final authority for terminology. However, if medical terminology is to be precise, universal, and easily understood in our cyber world there needs to be one agreed-upon term for this part of the distal humerus and all other anatomic structures.

For all anatomic terminology, there is an authoritative source. That source is the Federative Committee on Anatomical Terminology representing 56 international member associations of the International Federation of Associations of Anatomists. Their latest printed compendium is the Terminologia Anatomica: International Anatomical Terminology [3] formerly known as the Nomina Anatomica. The intent of the committee is clear in their preface on page V: “Anatomical terminology is the foundation of medical terminology and it is important that doctors and scientists throughout the world use the same name for each structure.” Their name for this part of the distal humerus is capitulum, as it was for Vesalius.

One study has reported the level of adherence to these published anatomic terms in the radiology literature [4]. Anonymous American radiology journals had a “close adherence” to the “official” terminology compared with radiology journals from other countries. I urge the editor to maintain this record of close adherence to this official terminology and to adopt the international anatomical terminology for all papers submitted to the AJR.

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References

Editor’s Reply

Stimulated by Dr. Mulligan’s criticism of the use of the word “capitellum,” a senior copyeditor for our journal did a little research aimed not at seeing what scientific terminology governing bodies state but rather at what seems to be the common usage of the terms.

On both PubMed and Google, more hits came up for capitellum than capitulum. But the most significant thing is that on both PubMed and Google, it was difficult to find any references to Dr. Mulligan’s preferred capitulum that refer to human anatomy. Virtually every entry had to do with either botany or entomology.

Capitellum, on the other hand, had more than 200 PubMed entries all dealing with human anatomy that come from sources such as AJR, Radiology, Arthroscopy, Journal of Hand Surgery, Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery, Orthopedics, and American Journal of Sports Medicine to name just a few.

The AJR will continue to accept “capitellum” as an acceptable term, even though Dr. Mulligan is technically correct.

Robert J. Stanley
Editor in Chief