

Gram versus gram

Edward Stachowski



TO THE EDITOR: While reading the previous issue of the Journal (December 2009), I noted an error that was repeated on a number of occasions. Two articles by authors of significant credibility (Lipman and Boots¹ and Kollef²) showed errors such that “Gram” was misrepresented as “gram”. For example, reference was made to “gram-negative organisms”, which should have been “Gram-negative organisms”.

I remind all concerned that, in microbiology, Gram refers to the technique of staining a sample with crystal violet dye and safranin. Hans Christian Joachim Gram, a Danish physician, was the initial inventor of the Gram stain in 1882. It was he who first demonstrated the staining of certain bacteria with crystal violet. Some years later, Carl Weigert, a German pathologist, added the final step of staining with safranin.

It is hard enough to beat this into trainees and exam candidates, and it does not help when a local journal

perpetuates this all too common error. While I certainly do not expect this letter to be published, I would welcome an addendum or correction of some sorts in the next issue of the Journal. At least this may help to persuade trainees to know a little more about this test that is often reported on critically ill patients.

Many thanks for all that you do in promoting and organising the Journal.

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References

1. Lipman J, Boots R. A new paradigm for treating infections: “go hard and go home”. *Crit Care Resusc* 2009; 11: 276-81.
2. Kollef MH. New antimicrobial agents for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*. *Crit Care Resusc* 2009; 11: 282-6. □

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IN REPLY: It is gratifying to an editor that readers take a close interest in the style of the Journal. Stachowski is correct that “Gram” is conventionally capitalised in the eponymous term “Gram stain”, after its inventor. I agree it is worthwhile for trainees to know the history of their field and to honour the work of those who went before. However, current internationally accepted scientific style is to lower case the first letter of eponymous terms in derivative terms, such as “gram-negative bacteria”.

For example, the US-based Council of Science Editors (CSE) gives as a general rule in its comprehensive style manual:

Capitalize the first letter of an eponymic term for a virus, disease, syndrome, named chemical reaction, or named equation that incorporates a proper noun referring to a theoretician, researcher, physician, patient, or place. Do not capitalize derivative or adjectival forms.¹

The manual lists among examples of this rule, “Gram stain but gram-negative bacteria”.

This lower-case usage is echoed by many other authorities, including the American Medical Association style manual,² microbiology textbooks,³ and dictionaries.^{4,5}

Thus, I recommend that the Journal continue to use lower case for “gram-negative” and “gram-positive”, in line with internationally accepted usage.

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3. Talaro K, Talaro A. Foundations in microbiology. Dubuque, IA: Wm C Brown, 1993.
4. Dorlands illustrated medical dictionary. 28th ed. Philadelphia: WB Saunders, 1994.
5. Marcovitch H, editor. Black's medical dictionary. 42nd ed. London: A and C Black Publishers, 2010. □