

## Difficulties in Translating Medical Texts

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*To translate or not to translate: that is the recurring question*

"Durante o *round*, o *staff* prescreveu um *dripping* de insulina e ordenou um *check up* duas horas depois." That is how it is said in Portuguese! Or at least that is the best way to make it understood in the medical environment. This is where the difficulties in translating medical texts begin: the use of terms in foreign languages — especially English — is so common that if we wanted to substitute *round* for its Portuguese equivalent "ronda," *staff* for "chefe de equipe" and *dripping* for "gotejamento," we would force the doctor-reader to "untranslate" a fair part of the text to be able to understand it. On the other hand, keeping these terms in their original language may render the text unintelligible to the layman, to students who are starting their course, or anybody else who has little knowledge of the foreign language. So, what to do?

Medicine is a field of knowledge in accelerated scientific and technological development that each year incorporates a large number of new terms into the medical lexicon. Because of the need to quickly update their knowledge, health professionals learn directly in the original language of the publication and stick to it in daily usage, including congresses and articles written in Portuguese.

It is only much later on that the first attempts to translate these terms start to timidly appear, and this leads to further problems: for a lot of words, it is not easy to find suitable corresponding terms in Portuguese, thus making translation difficult. This process is often carried out by medical students who have no translating experience and little knowledge of the source language, or especially of the target language. They can also be carried out by professional translators who are not familiar with the associated vocabulary or medical practice, resulting in seriously distorted meanings.



Amateur translators and medical students may not be a wise combination.



Amateur translators seldom perform in-depth research into terms that have already been translated in medical literature, which results in highly heterogeneous translations from one publication to another. Finally, medical translation is a poorly paid field, which is inevitably reflected in the quality. All these difficulties can explain doctors' resistance to the adoption of translated terms and their consensual and definitive incorporation into the profession's jargon.

Nevertheless, even though almost all of our medical knowledge is imported and not very well adapted to the Brazilian reality, adopting some simple measures can, at least, preserve the language we use. The first of these involves losing your fear and translating all foreign terms the very first time that they are published in Portuguese, thus avoiding their continued use in their original language. A good option, in certain cases, would be to keep the original in brackets to increase the reader's comprehension.

It is fundamental for amateur translators to ask for linguistic advice from translation professionals to avoid the classic pitfalls and to have the text thoroughly proofread. Furthermore, professional translators who have no medical training must build up an extensive network of contacts with health professionals in order to be able to ask questions and discuss meanings. This advice is also valid for translators who do have medical training, because the field of medical knowledge is so vast that it is impossible for any one person to be familiar with the entire lexicon.

Extensive bibliographical research must always be undertaken to search for terms that have already been published in earlier publications, making an effort to stick with the choice made by the first translator (as long as it is sensible enough). Consistent translations make the text easier to understand and facilitate the incorporation of new words into the jargon. This basic translation concept is often neglected by amateur translators. Finally, if publishers and translation companies are committed to the products they provide, they must pay professionals satisfactorily. Poorly paid work leads to rush jobs, consequently lowering the quality of the final result. These measures will help improve the quality of medical text translations, whether you decide to leave the terms untranslated or not.

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