The advantages of being called NICE: a systematic review of journal article titles using the acronym for the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

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ABSTRACT

Objective To describe the use of NICE, the acronym for the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, as both an adjective and noun in peer-reviewed journal article titles.


Data sources Ovid databases (MEDLINE, All EBM Reviews, EMBASE, ERIC, CINAHL and PsycINFO) covering the formation of NICE in 1999 to February 2008.

Review methods Independent review of eligible titles by both authors and resolution of disagreements based on consideration of full text articles.

Results 2274 articles were retrieved that included reference to NICE in their titles. Of these, 167 (7.3%) used NICE as an adjective, most commonly in conjunction with the terms ‘work’, ‘not so’ (NICE), ‘nasty’, ‘mess’ and ‘try’.

Conclusions The work of NICE has been widely referenced in peer-reviewed journal article titles, sometimes with apparent humorous intent when used as an adjective. Well-chosen names may increase the recognizability of public health organizations and help to communicate their roles.

Keywords names, NICE, publications, review

Introduction

Investigators in public health research use a number of rhetorical devices to draw attention to their work, particularly in the titles of their papers, which include literary allusions, humour and acronyms. Acronym-named randomized controlled trials are cited twice as frequently as their non-acronymous equivalents, suggesting that this device is useful in promoting research. Notable examples include CASANOVA, FANTASTIC and PASTA.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence, known commonly by its acronym, NICE, was established in 1999 with the aims of improving standards of patient care and reducing inequities in access to innovative treatments. We hypothesized that by creating an acronym that was also a commonly used adjective, NICE, perhaps inadvertently, had encouraged authors of journal articles to use titles in which the organization is referred to as both a proper noun and an adjective.

Our aims were therefore to quantify references to NICE in peer-reviewed journal article titles using systematic review methodology and to determine its use as a noun and as a noun and an adjective in combination.

Methods

Search strategy

We carried out a search using the keyword term ‘NICE’ using the following OVID databases:
Ovid MEDLINE (1996 to January 2008)
All EBM Reviews—Cochrane DSR, ACP Journal Club, DARE, CCTR, CMR, HTA and NHSEED (from 1996 to February week 1 2008)
EMBASE (1996 to 2008 week 06)
ERIC (1965 to January 2008)
CINAHL (1982 to December week 1 2007)
PsycINFO (2000 to February week 1 2008)

All titles were independently reviewed by both authors and the results categorized into noun, adjective, or not relevant. This latter included references to ‘Nice’ (France) or ‘nice’ used in its normal adjectival sense such as Are nice dentists purely fictional?7 Disagreements in title choices were resolved by discussion and a final list of eligible results was obtained.

Results

A total of 2274 titles were retrieved containing the term NICE. Of these titles, 167 (7.3%) used the capitalized word NICE as both an adjective and proper noun (see Table 1), and the remaining 2107 (92.7%) were deemed to be using NICE solely as a noun. The most frequent adjectival use of NICE was in relation to work. Eighteen titles (10.8%) included the term ‘work’ of which 15 used it in the term ‘NICE work’. Ten provided ‘not so NICE’ descriptions, and, by contrast, nine used the word ‘nasty’ in the title. Eight described a ‘NICE mess’ of which one was ‘Another NICE mess’.8 A further three combined it to give ‘NICE try’. Two ‘NICE behaviours’ appeared in the same edition of the BMJ.9,10 Other nouns described as NICE included a winter conference11 and hips.12 Several phrases were used, including ‘NICE one, Frank!’,13 ‘NICE guys finish first’,14 and ‘NICE to see you ... ’15 No titles were identified that used NICE as part of an adverb (e.g. NICEness, NICEty). Chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) appeared with an adjectival NICE in four titles.

Discussion

NICE and its sometimes controversial guidance16 have been discussed widely in peer-reviewed medical journals since its inception in 1999. Its name has also been used as an adjective in 7% of references to the organization, indicating that authors have taken the opportunity to engage readers with phrases that are sometimes putatively humorous.

Origins of titles

The high prevalence of references to ‘NICE work’ indicates the pervasiveness of George and Ira Gershwin’s song Nice Work if You Can Get It (published in 1937). The use of antonymy, by contrasting NICE with nasty, is a common rhetorical device. Oliver Hardy’s famous exhortation to his partner, Stan Laurel, ‘Here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into’, provided the inspiration for 5% of adjectival NICE titles. The reference to then Health Secretary Frank Dobson in ‘NICE one, Frank!’ may allude to the 1973 tribute song to Spurs footballer Cyril Knowles, Nice One, Cyril (Nice one, son ... ). The origins of the phrase ‘NICE guys finish first’ are unclear, although the phrase was used as a chapter title in The Selfish Gene in 1976.17 The entertainer Bruce Forsyth’s greeting, ‘Nice to see you, to see you nice’ is likely to have inspired Bosanquet’s article.15

Etymology of nice

While memorable, the word nice has equivocal meanings.18 Its Latin root, nescius (from nescire not to know) meant ignorant, and in Middle English described foolish or wanton actions. It is variously referred to in contemporary

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dictionaries as showing fastidious tastes, having exacting requirements or standards, or possessing great precision and delicacy.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps only these most recent definitions might find favour with NICE.

**Implications for practice**

Acronyms are used extensively in medicine and other biological sciences both for efficiency and sometimes as professional jargon to obscure references to serious and feared conditions. In taking on the role as judge of whether new and often expensive health technologies should be provided by the National Health Service, NICE was inevitably going to make unpopular and controversial decisions that might negatively affect the lives of some patients. It may, therefore, have been prescient of the founders of NICE to have chosen a name that implied that their work was beneficent. Whether the wider potential uses of the acronym—including antonyms—were considered is not clear.

Public health professionals have an important role in communicating effectively. Many public health organizations’ responsibilities are not clear from their titles and their documents have won the Plain English Campaign’s ignominious Golden Bull awards (http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/golden-bulls.htm). The choice of a clear and memorable title should help others understand an organization’s purpose and in subtler ways may have the potential to imply its values.

**Conclusions**

The work of NICE has been widely cited in peer-reviewed journals and it may have benefited from its potential to be used adjectivally in article titles. Well-chosen names for public health organizations may improve their recognizability and contribute to the important public health role of effective communication.

**Contributions**

We declare that we participated in the design, analysis and drafting of this work and that we have seen and approved the final version.

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**References**

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