Re: Abbs

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Medical records are important, and with this in mind, an appropriate committee of the professional staff of Henry Ford Hospital periodically develops a handbook for the guidance of those making entries and handling the records. The 1977 edition of "The Medical Record" concluded with a section entitled "Approved Abbreviations." The eight pages contained 302 abbreviations, said to have been approved by the Medical and Advisory Boards. In the spring of 1982, it was time for a new edition of "The Medical Record." Appropriately, the list of abbreviations was circulated to the staff for deletions or additions. In the interval between publications, the list of "currently approved abbreviations" had somehow more than doubled—to a total of 716!

I started reading the list of abbreviations with a deep-seated negative bias. The tendency of younger writers of medical articles, especially surgeons, to use contrived abbreviations irritates me. Usually, one can look at the beginning of the article or in the abstract to find the key to the hieroglyphics, but I would rather see the words spelled out unless they are in a table or a place calling for the utmost brevity of spacing. Morris Fishbein, the longtime editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association, agrees with me. Chapter 8 of his book Medical Writing: The Technic and the Art is about abbreviations and begins as follows: "In Scientific Writing, abbreviations should be kept to a minimum and should follow a recognized standard. If nonstandard or special abbreviations must be employed, as in tabular or condensed material, they should be explained in a footnote." I realize that writing in a medical record is not exactly the same as writing for a scientific journal, but accuracy and clarity are essential in both situations.

Although it is obviously unfair to the authors (and editors) to list "contrived" abbreviations out of context, I will give a few examples from recent publications. In two issues of the Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, I found the following: EDTA, PRP, ADP, ATP, LAPF₄, PPP, SOD, SEM, LDH, LVDP, LVEDP, EEE, SVT, CAVD, PVOD, CPS, MPS, HKS, CPB, ALVT, TCRV and DRV. In recent issues of this journal, I found: PRG, DVT, GPI, NADP, MTL, WTL, TT, AS, RA, ITP, CHS, ACT and CWDF. For readers who may be in doubt about the meaning of some of these abbreviations, the answers are given in order in the footnote.

Let us return to the "approved" list of 716 abbreviations proposed for the new medical record handbook. As I looked over the first page of the As (there were two pages of them), I saw a number which could be omitted. I made the following comments about each abbreviation.

**Key to abbreviations from the Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery: EDTA: Ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid; PRP: platelet-rich plasma; ADP: adenosine diphosphate; ATP: adenosine triphosphate; LAPF₄: low affinity platelet factor 4; PPP: not defined; PSS: physiologic saline solution; SOD: superoxide dismutase; SEM: not defined; LDH: lactic acid dehydrogenase; LVDP: left ventricular developed pressure; LVEDP: left ventricular end-diastolic pressure; EEV: encircling endocardial ventriculotomy; SVT: supraventricular tachyarrhythmia; CAVD: complete atrioventricular defect; PVOD: pulmonary valvar obstructive disease; CPS: cardiopulmonary solution; MPS: magnesium procaine solution; HKS: high potassium solution; CPB: cardiopulmonary by-pass (page heading); ALVT: aortico-left-ventricular tunnel; TCRV: two-chambered right ventricle; and DRV: double outlet right ventricle.

From the Henry Ford Hospital Medical Journal: PRG: phleborheograph; DVT: deep venous thrombosis; GPI: glucose phosphate isomerase; NADP: not defined; MTL: Mediterranean type lymphoma; WTL: Western type lymphoma; TT: tetanus toxoid; AS: ankylosing spondylitis; RA: rheumatoid arthritis; ITP: idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura; CHS: Chediak-Higashi syndrome; ACT: anterior chamber tap (eye); and CWDF: cell wall defective bacterial forms.
aa This is an abbreviation used in old-fashioned prescription writing, meaning “equal parts of,” as in:

Chloralis hydratis gr. x1
Potassii bromidis iss
Aquae et syrripi aurantii q.s. ad oz ij M

Sig: Tablespoonful in water at bedtime.

I doubt if the abbreviation “aa” would be found in 100,000 consecutive records. Even if it were used in a prescription, copies of prescriptions are not filed in the medical record. So, I would delete this abbreviation from the list of more than seven hundred.

AA The second abbreviation stands for Alcoholics Anonymous. For both lay and professional persons, this is a commonly accepted abbreviation. I do not think a staff member giving advice to an alcoholic needs the blessing of the document subcommittee to use the abbreviation in the medical record if he or she prefers not to write out the name of the organization. Omit.

AAA I think it would be preferable if our abbreviations could stand alone, and ordinarily “Triple A” means the American Automobile Association. Of course, if one had just described a pulsating mass in the abdomen, a likely guess would be that it meant abdominal aortic aneurysm. But if I had discovered such a mass on routine physical examination, I would have been so proud that I would have taken time to spell out the three words. I realize that when the triple A appears on the vascular surgery division’s O.R. schedule (there I go, using an abbreviation for operating room), the operating room personnel will set up for an abdominal aortic aneurysmectomy. Let’s not fuss with the vascular surgeons for using this bit of shorthand in their in-service communications; but perhaps it is better in the general prose of the medical record if this ominous diagnosis is spelled out. “AAA” was not on the old list. Perhaps we could dispense with it on the new one.

ab This is said to represent “abortion.” I suppose busy gynecologists might say they had time to write out “threatened . . .,” but not time for the complete word “abortion.” I would put this in the same category as AAA.

abd If someone wanted to write “abd. pain” instead of abdominal pain,” I suppose there would be no objection, but does this privilege need the blessing of the subcommittee?

ABE When I saw this, I thought of the Great Emancipator. Somehow, it does not have the same meaning for me that SBE does. But if the Infectious Diseases Division feels that it cannot function without official sanction for this abbreviation for “acute bacterial endocarditis,” we will leave it in.

ABG This abbreviation might not stand alone, but if followed by values for oxygen content of the blood, etc., it would be decipherable as standing for “arterial blood gases.”

AC From the Latin “ante cibus,” this abbreviation is ordinarily written only on prescriptions or on the drug order sheet. It is such a standard abbreviation for “before meals” that approval on the medical record list seems superfluous.

Acid This is supposed to represent acid phosphatase, but it is a poor abbreviation. Phosphatase is an enzyme which hydrolyzes the salts of phosphorus, while PO₄ is the phosphate radical of such chemical entities as H₂PO₄, orthophosphoric acid. A proper abbreviation given in a chemistry reference manual is “Acid p’tase.” Our laboratory reports this finding in a slightly different way, but certainly not as “Acid PO₄.” Omit.

ACTH This much-used abbreviation for adrenocorticotropic hormone is so well known that its appearance on this list seems unnecessary.

AD This stands for “auris dexter,” Latin for “right ear.” It is not even used on the technical sheets of our Audiology Division. Their sheet says simply “right” and “left,” with ear being understood. Omit. The same can be said of AU, which appears later, from the Latin “auris uterque” meaning “each ear.”

ADL This is supposed to mean “activities of daily living,” but it almost certainly would be incomprehensible in any context to the reader of a medical record. If I had encountered it, I might have guessed that it meant “aid to dependent live-ins.”

Ad Lib This is a well-known word on our order sheets and no doubt will continue to be used whether or not it is approved for this list.
Medical Abbreviations

AF It is commonly used to mean "Air Force," but if a cardiologist is too busy to write "atrial flutter," I suppose he or she should have the privilege.

AFB This is rather commonly used to denote the tubercle bacillus. Omit.

A/G Ratio is also a rather standard term for albumin/globulin ratio.

ALG This term would be incomprehensible standing alone, but a specialist in transplantation would probably recognize it as Annapolis lymphoblastic globulin.

AHD Rather commonly used to mean arteriosclerotic heart disease. I am surprised to see that it also means "autoimmune hemolytic disease." Confusing? Yes.

AK Probably not used much except with the addition of another "A" to make it:

AKA In view of the medico-legal considerations of removing someone's leg to include the knee joint, it would probably be better to write out the words in their entirety, i.e., "above knee amputation."

ALD This would not be recognized as an independent abbreviation. It sounds as if someone started to spell "aldosteronism" instead of "alcoholic liver disease." Omit.

Alk PO₄ See discussion of "Acid PO₄." Omit.

AMA I thought this means American Medical Association. In view of the medico-legal importance of a patient's leaving the hospital "against medical advice," it would certainly be better to spell out the words.

ANT Well-recognized abbreviation of "anterior." Omit.

AODM This would puzzle many readers of a medical record. But it means "adult onset diabetes mellitus!"

After getting this far down the list of more than seven hundred abbreviations, it seemed that my criteria for omitting an item fall into the following six categories:

1. Universally recognized abbreviation (e.g., Dr. = Doctor).
2. Would appear only on the printed form of a specialty (e.g., OD for right eye).
3. Would likely not be recognized if out of context (e.g., ALG).
4. Would appear only on laboratory reports or as a standard chemical symbol (e.g., Cl).
5. Safer to spell out.
6. A crude or uncouth abbreviation, or written slang (e.g., Rx-ed for "treated").

I went over the entire list of 716 abbreviations and indicated whether or not the item would fall into one of the above six categories for rejection. Using this method, I was able to shorten the list by over 600 entries, leaving only 112 for a possibly essential list.

I have an even better suggestion for the committee. THROW OUT THE WHOLE LIST. The new handbook might conclude as follows: "The 1977 Medical Record Handbook had a list of 302 Acceptable Approved Abbreviations. A tentative list has grown to over seven hundred, so the committee has decided to discard the list and to plead that if an abbreviation is used, it be one which will be understandable to any professional person reading the record."

If these comments should be seen by members of the Records Committee and result in a dangerous degree of agitation, I will be glad to provide a personal prescription for the sedative medication mentioned above.

There is probably no effective cure for CAS (chronic abbreviation syndrome), so the only hope may lie in preventive measures.

Addendum: After this article was written, the new Henry Ford Hospital Medical Record Handbook came off the press. It has no list of abbreviations!