Watch your language!

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We continue our series in which Consultant Interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab…and beyond. In this column, he considers Latin.

Latin is a language
As dead as dead can be,
It killed the ancient Romans
And now it's killing me.

Such was the oft muttered rhyme that could be heard in the hushed corridors of a North London Grammar school, *circa* the late 1960s. Indeed, I suspect this echoed in most classrooms up and down the country as teenagers struggled to recite *"amo, amas amat, amamus, amatis, amant"*, even though the social and emotional significance of the verb had little relevance to 'Norell minor' at that age.

As O levels (or GCSEs as they are now known) appeared over the horizon, we had to select a subject in addition to the usual Maths, Add. Maths (whatever that was), Physics, Chemistry, History, Eng. Lang., Eng. Lit. and French. This choice was from Biology, German and …Latin.

Choices

At that time I had a vague idea that Medicine might feature among my career possibilities, in addition to footballer (yeah, right!), spy or comedian. So while learning about plants and animals might have been considered the logical answer, there was something about studying an ancient tongue that had a classical quaintness about it. Learning Latin also came with a certain degree of elitism as the class contained relatively few pupils, was taught by one of the school's most exacting and strictest 'masters', and resulted in one being regarded by one's peers as a tad quirky.

Furthermore, I had rationalised my juvenile decision with the contention that much of the language of Medicine had its origins in Latin and that I could make up for any ignorance of anatomy and physiology by taking Zoology at A level. Also, our classwork or homework (we didn't call it 'prep' because this was a state school), had to be written – without errors – with a fountain pen, and in an impressive hardback exercise book, rather than in the more traditional and slightly cheap looking soft-cover version used by my pals for all other subjects.

Translation

And so began my brief flirtation with what might be regarded as 'classics-light' and culminated eventually in a reasonable grade C. Lessons were festooned with translations from Latin to English, and *vice versa*, and characterised by developing familiarity with phrases that could have no possible practical use in the modern era whatsoever.

So, sentences like "the daughters of the farmers are in the field with the sailors" would require writing in Latin, and the reverse would apply to other memorable lines like "some say one thing, others another, but they all blame the folly of the general".

Our main textbook (*Approach to Latin*, if I recall) did contain some pleasing attempts at humour, allowing the odd smile or chuckle to permeate the otherwise stony silence of our classroom. So the phrase "*o me miserum*" appeared in the vocabulary list as "woe is me" and, as an alternative, "hang it all!"

History

There is no doubt that such study also provided a glimpse into Roman history and the various characters dotted about the Empire that have since become legend. One such personality was Cicero who, it turns out, was a bit of a wit. In one section of our textbook he appeared in a passage for translation headed "Some of Cicero's Jests". Apparently he was sitting in judgement over a youth accused of bumping off his father by poisoning him with appropriately doctored pastries. The angry young man continually berated the judge with an endless series of expletives, which Cicero listened to patiently. Eventually, after the rancour had subsided, our hero remarked, "Shout all you like. I would rather have your insults than your cakes". (I'll pause here to allow you to recover from a fit of uncontrollable hysterics.)

Modern TV and cinema provide somewhat more lurid accounts of that portion of world history. No doubt if our own lessons had been dotted with more of the sand, sweat, sex, scandals, seedy politics and grotesque violence that characterise films like *Gladiator*, our classes would have been well over-subscribed, and recruitment to increase the number of available Latin teachers would have been demanded.

Writing the date in Latin was an exercise in itself, as each day related to its position relative to fixed points in the Roman month, namely the Nones (the fifth day) and the Ides (the thirteenth). N.B. (*nota bene*), this does not apply to all months of the year. As we used to recite *ad nauseam*, "March, July, October, May, make Nones the seventh and Ides the fifteenth day".

Relevance

Is it relevant? Judging by the blank expressions I got earlier this year when I embarked upon a particularly complex percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) list and warned the lab staff that it was the *Ides of March*, I doubt it. But you will have noticed in the paragraphs above that many Latin phrases have assumed a day-to-day role in our own language, and Medicine is no exception.

We write the letter 'c' as a short version of *cum* meaning 'with', and talk about *mane* for procedures scheduled for the next morning. We prescribe drugs to be taken as o.d., b.d. or *t.d.s.*, perhaps oblivious to their classical origins. Similarly, abbreviations such as *e.g.*, *et al.*, *i.e.* and *etc.*, all started the same way and the annotated 'R' that we use as an abbreviation to indicate treatment, originates from recipe, the imperative form of the verb recipere, meaning 'take'.

As for Cardiology, some still refer to the ramus *intermedius* as it leaves the left main stem, let alone to it being full of *atheroma* (from Greek, *via* Latin and meaning 'porridge' or 'gruel')

Understanding

Did studying Latin help with my medical career? Probably not, but it was enormous fun. It also provided an opportunity to glimpse at a small aspect of the past and the origins of so much of our language. And anyone who likes to write, or talk, or to communicate generally (which I guess applies to me) may do so with a richer understanding of from when and where their words have come.

And be in no doubt that the study of Latin pertains to the modern interventional era as well. As Julius Caesar famously announced in 47 BC after succeeding in a short war in Turkey, and encountering a patient with severe and inoperable aortic stenosis, *"Veni vidi, TAVI"*