

Shakespeare's "Hoar Leprosy"

TO THE EDITOR:

For those members of the College of Hansenology of the Endemic Countries who participated in their II Congress (Baton Rouge and Carville, Louisiana, U.S.A., December 1985), it was heartening to read the names "Hansen's disease" in most reports by American contributors, and "National Hansen's Disease Center" in pamphlets, stationery and signs at the former U.S. Public Health Service Hospital and on neighboring road signs. This will certainly help in consolidating the changes occurring in Brazil, Italy, Portugal, Israel, Jamaica, Trinidad-Tobago, Bolivia, and Guyana, and will also be a satisfaction to all who agree that "Leprosy" is "the most negative of all medical terms" (inquiry in the U.S. ⁶), "the continued psychic pain and trauma" (inquiry in the U.S. ⁵), "the carrier of stigma and blocker of education" (inquiry in Argentina ³), "the destroyer of the patient's personality" (inquiry in Brazil ²).

The new American term, which has also been extended to all outpatient clinics in the country, reveals that the U.S. Public Health Service had not considered the weak arguments against a new name important enough to outweigh the evident advantages of a modern and scientific terminology. In fact, none of these arguments have any validity and/or ethical foundations. Even Shakespeare has been brought to the proscenium—"What's in a name?"—to cooperate in the not so noble task of maintaining the hanseniasis patients in the darkness of the Middle Ages with "the tragic name of leprosy" (¹).

However, it will be appropriate to point out that by saying that "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," Juliet was not

advising Romeo to keep his trouble-making family name, but imploring him to change it. And she meant it: if Romeo was not that courageous, she would change hers. Juliet is a witness for the changers, not for the anti-changers. Incidentally, the bad-smelling name "leprosy" is not exactly a rose. "Deny thy father, and refuse thy name; or if thou wilt not, but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; thou art thyself though, not a Montague. What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man. O! be some other name: What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Sc. II, line 34)

Some facts are really strange: objectionable names for persons, animals, products, ideas, countries, places, diseases, and organizations are changed daily. It is normal everywhere and the Bard is never involved. In contrast, Juliet's "What's in a name?" almost never fails to be misapplied when it comes to torture the already unfortunate hanseniasis patients and their families in the inferno of a medieval, shameful, and ostracizing terminology. It is not fair to the memory of Shakespeare to even suggest that he would have preferred that "tuberculosis," "mental disease," "sexually transmitted disease," "handicapped person," should fall back to the unacceptable "consumption," "lunacy," "venereal disease," "cripple" of the past. It is unthinkable that the International Leprosy Association (ILA) would relinquish its officially accepted term "leprosy patient" to retrograde to the "leper" of the Bard's times. It must be pointed out that even the ILA is not quite happy with its

own name: "leprosy" is a word ". . . to be used with caution, since it tends to have a socio-historical, in addition to a medical connotation" (XI International Leprosy Congress, Workshop on Human Aspects in the Treatment of Leprosy Patients, Mexico City, 1978).

The fact is that when it comes to the point, that is, "leprosy," not "roses," Shakespeare knew very well what that meant: "Will knit and break religions, bless the accurs'd; make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves and give them title, knee and approbation" (*Timon of Athens*, Act IV, Sc. III, line 34). "Be general leprosy! Breath infect breath, that their society, as their friendship, may be merely poison!" (*Timon of Athens*, Act IV, Sc. I, line 30).

McGeoch⁽⁴⁾ clarifies: "It is well to point out here that Shakespeare frequently used the words leprosy, serpigo, tetter, itch, blain and pox in a non-specific sense in the form of a curse or deprecatory figure of speech": "And in the porches of mine ears did pour the leperous distilment; whose effect holds such an enmity with blood of man" (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. V, line 61).

It is clear, therefore, that Shakespeare would have objected to the repeated misuse of his name to justify the continued "cursing and deprecating" of hanseniasis patients with the "hoar leprosy" of the 16th century.

I am hopeful that the new terminological policy of the U.S. Public Health Service becomes adopted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and by all other countries whose educational and preventive programs continue to be hindered by the horrifying label "leprosy," "the most negative of all medical terms" (6).

—Dr. Abrahão Rotberg

R. Pedrosa Alvarenga 1255/74
São Paulo 04531, Brazil

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