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ILLNESSES AND DISEASES: ARTICLE OR NOT?
THAT’S QUESTION!

The paper analyses the use of articles with the names of illnesses, diseases and disorders in the English language. The paper is divided into three parts. The first one summarizes rules about the articles and illnesses in prescriptive grammar books. The second one contains a table which aims to present the list of illnesses, diseases and disorders with corresponding articles. The final one focuses on the results of the research which was based on the comparison of the theoretical background and the actual use of articles with the names of illnesses, diseases and disorders in The Family Medical Reference Book.

1. Introduction

In general, the functioning of articles in the English language is far from being clear. One of the most controversial areas and at the same time the least dealt with is the use of articles with illnesses and diseases. This is the main reason why we have concentrated on this field of research.

2. Various approaches to the use of articles with the names of illnesses

Studying the essential prescriptive grammars of the English language only the following information has been found:

A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (2004, p. 279) suggests the zero article for the following illnesses:

- anaemia, appendicitis, diabetes, influenza, pneumonia.

However, the definite article alternates with the zero article for infectious diseases:

- (the) flu, (the) measles, (the) mumps, (the) chicken pox, (the) hiccups.

The article is not normally omitted with the/a plague, the bends, the jitter, the/a bellyache, a cold, a fever, and a temperature. The fixed expression catch cold is an exception. Nouns formed from ache are non-count when they denote a condition. On the other hand, when they denote a single attack, they are count in AmE and non-count in BrE.

According to Alexander (1998, p. 61), the indefinite article is obligatory in these instances:

- a cold, a headache, a sore throat, a weak heart, a broken leg.

We can use or omit the indefinite article in these expressions:

- catch (a) cold, have (a) backache, (a) stomach-ache, (a) toothache, (an) earache.

Articles are not used with illnesses which are plural in form: measles, mumps, shingles and with illnesses which are considered as uncountable:

- flu, goat, hepatitis, high blood pressure.

But at the same time it is possible to combine the definite article with flu, measles and mumps.

Hais (1991, p. 62) introduces articles in the cases of:

- a headache, (the) toothache, (the) measles, (a) flu.

An article is not placed before the names of the following illnesses:

- pneumonia, bronchitis, influenza, fever, cancer, lumbago, sunstroke.

If the illness is described in more details, we use the article.

A Grammar of Contemporary English (1984, p. 158) recommends the zero article in the following expressions:

- appendicitis, anaemia, diabetes, influenza.

However, some names of illnesses can be preceded by the definite article:

- the plague, (the) flu, (the) measles, (the) mumps.

A University Grammar of English (1975, p. 74) gives the same rules with the same examples for the use of articles with the names of illnesses.

According to Advanced Learners’ Grammar (2003, p. 274) we do not use any article with illnesses:

- He’s got lung cancer. She’s had German measles.

There is no mention about the use of articles with illnesses and diseases in Grammar of Spoken and Written English (2000).

3. The overview of illnesses, diseases and disorders with corresponding articles

THE FAMILY MEDICAL REFERENCE BOOK has been chosen to verify the above mentioned concepts and, at the same time to provide us with the possibility to work out a more complete overview of the use of articles with illnesses and diseases which have not been taken into consideration yet. The following table aims to present the list of illnesses, diseases and disorders.

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| Class of illness according to systems of body | Particular illness, disease and disorder | Marked use of articles with illness, disease and disorder |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Mental illness                              | Anxiety                                 | *If there is a specific reason for the anxiety – the generic use of the definite article (the class represented by its typical specimen)* *an anxiety about being contaminated would be reduced by washing hands; but since the anxiety soon returns – anaphoric ref.- direct* *the anxiety increases and the patient does what he or she has always done – tries to avoid the anxiety by withdrawing from the situation* *a – generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen); the – anaphoric ref.- direct* |
|                                             | – Chronic anxiety                       |                                                       |
|                                             | Phobia                                  |                                                       |
|                                             | – Agoraphobia                           |                                                       |
|                                             | – Social phobia                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Depression                              |                                                       |
|                                             | – Neurotic/reactive depression          |                                                       |
|                                             | – Endogenous depression                 |                                                       |
|                                             | – Psychotic depression                  |                                                       |
|                                             | – Manic depression                      |                                                       |
|                                             | – Mild reactive depression              |                                                       |
|                                             | Suicide                                 |                                                       |
|                                             | Anorexia nervosa                        |                                                       |
|                                             | Bulimia nervosa                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Alcoholism                              |                                                       |
|                                             | Senile dementia                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Multi-infarct dementia                  |                                                       |
|                                             | Pre-senile dementia                     |                                                       |
|                                             | Alzheimer’s disease                     |                                                       |
|                                             | Schizophrenia                           |                                                       |
|                                             | Obsessional neurosis                    |                                                       |
|                                             | Hysteria                                |                                                       |
| Skin disorders and diseases                 | Xeroderma                               | *Two types of naevus are the Port-wine stain and the strawberry mark. – the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)* |
|                                             | Anhidrosis                              |                                                       |
|                                             | Epidermolysis bullosa                   |                                                       |
|                                             | Psoriasis                               |                                                       |
|                                             | A birthmark/naevus                      |                                                       |
|                                             | A mole                                  |                                                       |
|                                             | Dermatitis                              |                                                       |
|                                             | – Atopic dermatitis                     |                                                       |
|                                             | Eczema                                  |                                                       |
|                                             | – Atopic eczema                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Contact dermatitis                      |                                                       |
|                                             | Seborrhoeic dermatitis                  |                                                       |
|                                             | Lichen simplex                          |                                                       |
|                                             | Stasis dermatitis                       |                                                       |
|                                             | Varicose eczema                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Nappy rash                              |                                                       |
|                                             | Allergic eczema                         |                                                       |
|                                             | Impetigo                                |                                                       |
|                                             | A boil                                  |                                                       |
|                                             | Erysipelas / Cellulitis                 |                                                       |
|                                             | A wart                                  |                                                       |
| Conditions                        | Notes                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| **Cold sores**                   |                                            |
| Genital ulcers                   |                                            |
| Shingles                         |                                            |
| Chickenpox                       |                                            |
| Thrush / Monilia                 |                                            |
| Athlete’s foot                   |                                            |
| Ringworm                         |                                            |
| Scabies                          |                                            |
| Lice                             |                                            |
| - Head lice                       |                                            |
| - Body lice                       |                                            |
| - Pubic lice                      |                                            |
| Fleas                            |                                            |
| A tumour                          |                                            |
| Rodent ulcers                    |                                            |
| Solar keratosis                   |                                            |
| Squamous cell carcinoma           |                                            |
| Malignant melanoma                |                                            |
| Acne                             |                                            |
| Chilblains                       |                                            |
| Ichthyosis                       |                                            |
| Urticaria / Nettle rash / Hives   |                                            |
| Pruritus                          |                                            |
| - Pruritus vulvae                 |                                            |
| - Pruritus ani                    |                                            |
| Jaundice                          |                                            |
| **Hair diseases**                |                                            |
| Ringworm                         |                                            |
| Baldness/Alopecia                 |                                            |
| - Male-pattern alopecia           |                                            |
| - Alopecia areata                 |                                            |
| An ingrowing hair                 |                                            |
| Hirsutism                         |                                            |
| **Disorders of the respiratory system** |                              |
| Rhinitis                          |                                            |
| Hay fever                         |                                            |
| Perennial rhinitis                |                                            |
| Vasomotor rhinitis                |                                            |
| Allergic rhinitis                 |                                            |
| Sinusitis                         |                                            |
| - Acute sinusitis                 |                                            |
| - Chronic sinusitis               |                                            |
| - Maxillary sinusitis             |                                            |
| - Ethmoid sinusitis               |                                            |
| - Frontal sinusitis               |                                            |
| - Sphenoid sinusitis              |                                            |
| Laryngitis                        |                                            |
| Pharyngitis                       |                                            |
| Scarlet fever                     |                                            |
| Whooping cough                    |                                            |
| Overgrowth of the adenoids        |                                            |
| Tonsillitis                       |                                            |
| A sore throat                     |                                            |
| A cough                           |                                            |
| A sneeze                          |                                            |
| Choking                           |                                            |
| Croup                             |                                            |
| - Catarrhal croup                 |                                            |
| Laryngotracheobronchitis          |                                            |

**Notes:**
- to kill the lice in them - cataphoric ref.
- the ulcer starts as a small raised patch - anaphoric ref. - direct
- the tumour grows - anaphoric ref. - direct
- the ingrowing hair can be removed with a needle - anaphoric ref. - direct

**Additional Notes:**
- The main symptom is a persistent chronic cough - the indefinite article with a descriptive role.
- The duration of the cough - anaphoric ref. - direct.
Hiccups
Asthma
  - Bronchitis
    - Acute bronchitis
    - Chronic bronchitis
  Emphysema
Pneumonia
  - Pneumococcal pneumonia
  - Double pneumonia
  - Acute pneumonia
Legionnaire’s disease
Tuberculosis
  - Pulmonary tuberculosis
Pneumoconiosis
  - Coal-miner’s pneumoconiosis
  - Asbestosis pneumoconiosis
  - Byssinosis pneumoconiosis
Lung cancer
  - Adenocarcinoma of the lung
  - Bronchogenic carcinoma
  - Bronchial carcinoma
  - Mesothelioma
Pleurisy - Primary pleurisy
  - Secondary pleurisy
Pulmonary embolism
Pulmonary abscess
Bronchiectasis
Pneumothorax

Disorders of the digestive system
Stomatitis
  - Gangrenous stomatitis
  - Aphtous stomatitis
Glossitis
Gingivitis
Thrush
Lichen planus
Halitosis
Parotitis
  - Septic parotitis
  - Recurrent parotitis
Salivary calculus
Cleft palate
Dental decay
An abscess
Dysphagia
A peptic ulcer
  - An adenoid ulcer
  - A gastric/stomach ulcer
  - A oesophageal ulcer
  - A pyloric ulcer
Peritonitis
Gastritis
Heartburn
Pyrosis
Flatulence
Aerophagia
Stomach/Gastric cancer
Pyloric stenosis
  - Hypertrophic pyloric stenosis
  - Adult pyloric stenosis
Hepatitis

until the hiccups die away – anaphoric ref. – direct
to find the cause of the asthma – the generic use of the definite article
(the class represented by its typical representative)
- Infectious hepatitis
- Serum hepatitis
- Chronic hepatitis
- Viral hepatitis
Cancer of the liver
Cirrhosis
Gallstones

- Cholecystitis
- Chronic cholecystitis
Acute pancreatitis
Chronic pancreatitis
Cystic fibrosis
Cancer of the pancreas
Crohn’s disease
Paralytic ileus
Malabsorption syndrome
Steatorrhea
Coeliac disease
Tropical sprue
A hernia
- An inguinal hernia
- A femoral hernia
- An umbilical hernia
- A hiatus hernia
Appendicitis
Colitis
- Mucous colitis
- Ulcerative colitis
Hirschsprung’s disease
Diverticulosis
Prolapse of the rectum
Haemorrhoids
- Internal haemorrhoids
- External haemorrhoids
Anal fissure
Fistula
Cancer of the colon and rectum
Constipation
Diarrhoea
- Acute diarrhoea
Gastroenteritis
Typhoid fever
Botulism
Dysentery
- Bacillary dysentery
- Amoebic dysentery

| Diseases and disorders of the urinary system | Kidney failure |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Kidney failure                               | - Acute kidney failure |
| - Chronic kidney failure                    | - Glomerulonephritis |
| - Acute glomerulonephritis                   | - Chronic glomerulonephritis |
| Bright’s disease                             | - Toxaemia |
| Toxaemia                                     | - Cystitis |
| Cystitis                                     | - Urethritis |
| Urethritis                                   | - Gonorrhoea |
| Gonorrhoea                                   | Urinary incontinence |
| - True incontinence                          | - Stress incontinence |
| - Stress incontinence                        | - Anal incontinence |

*If the incontinence is caused by an underlying disorder - anaphoric ref. - direct*

*The gallstones may form in the gall bladder - anaphoric ref. - direct*

*The hernia formed from part of the small intestine - anaphoric ref. - direct*
| **Muscle disorders** | **Paralysis**  
| | **Peripheral neuritis**  
| | **Flaccid paralysis**  
| | **Progressive spinal muscular atrophy**  
| | **Progressive spinal muscular atrophy of infancy**  
| | **Peroneal muscular atrophy**  
| | **Muscular dystrophy**  
| | **- Duchenne dystrophy**  
| | **- Facioscapulohumeral dystrophy**  
| | **- Myotonic dystrophy**  
| | **Myasthenia gravis**  
| | **Pigeon breast**  
| | **Osteoarthritis**  
| | **Rheumatoid arthritis**  
| | **Gout**  
| | **Ankylosing spondylitis**  
| | **Bursitis**  
| **Diseases of bone** | **Osteoporosis**  
| | **Paget’s disease**  
| | **Osteomyelitis**  
| **Blood disorders** | **Anaemia**  
| | **- Iron-deficiency anaemia**  
| | **- Pernicious anaemia**  
| | **- Aplastic anaemia**  
| | **- Haemolytic anaemia**  
| | **Bleeding disorders**  
| | **- Haemophilia**  
| | **- Purpura**  
| | **- Leukaemia**  
| **Disorders of the lymphatic system** | **Hodgkin’s disease**  
| | **Lymphoma**  
| | **Lymphangioma**  
| | **Lymphosarcoma**  
| | **Macroglobulinemias**  
| **Heart disease** | **Coronary heart disease**  
| | **Angina pectoris**  
| | **Coronary thrombosis**  
| | **(A heart attack)**  
| | **(A coronary attack)**  
| | **Congenital heart disease**  
| | **- Patent ductus arteriosus**  
| | **- Septal defects**  
| | **- Fallot’s tetralogy**  
| | **- Damaged valves**  
| | **Heart failure**  
| | **Pericarditis**  
| | **Cardiomyopathy**  
| | **Disorders of heart rhythm**  
| | **- Extrasystole**  

*If the anaemia is due to bleeding – anaphoric ref. – indirect
If the deficiency is severe it causes an anaemia very similar to that caused by vitamin B12 deficiency. - the indefinite article with a descriptive role

Treatment depends on the cause of the purpura. – the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)

*the person may survive the heart attack – the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)
In a so called “silent” coronary thrombosis - the indefinite article with a descriptive role
to have a very severe attack – the indefinite article with a descriptive role convalescence after a heart attack depends on the severity of the attack – a – the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class); the – anaphoric ref. – direct

Sometimes the extrasystole is not even noticed. – the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)
### Diseases of the blood vessels

| Condition                          | Description                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sinus arrhythmia                   |                                                                             |
| Atrial fibrillation                |                                                                             |
| Heart block                        |                                                                             |
| Arteriosclerosis                   |                                                                             |
| Thrombosis                         |                                                                             |
| Embolism                           |                                                                             |
| An aneurysm                        |                                                                             |
| Varicose veins                     |                                                                             |
| Fainting                           |                                                                             |
| Haemorrhage (bleeding)             |                                                                             |
| - External haemorrhage             |                                                                             |
| - Internal haemorrhage             |                                                                             |
| Hypotension                        |                                                                             |
| (Low blood pressure)               |                                                                             |
| Hypertension                       |                                                                             |
| (High blood pressure)              |                                                                             |

### Diseases of the blood vessels (cont.)

- **An air embolism** - a bubble of air in the veins - the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)
- **Blockage in the lungs** - a pulmonary embolism - the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)
- **The condition can lead to a potentially fatal pulmonary embolism** - the indefinite article with a descriptive role
- **Often the individual is not aware of the aneurysm** - the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)
- **If the aneurysm is detected** - anaphoric ref. - direct
- **Blood which leaks from the aneurysm** - anaphoric ref. - direct
- **In a varicose vein** - the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)
- **A single large haemorrhage will not cause anaemia** - the indefinite article with a descriptive role
- **Treatment is needed to relieve the hypertension in these cases** - cataphoric ref.

### Eye disorders

| Condition                          | Description                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Refractive errors                  |                                                                             |
| - Hypermetropia                    | (Long sight)                                                                |
| - Myopia                           | (Short sight)                                                                |
| - Astigmatism                      |                                                                             |
| Infections and inflammations       |                                                                             |
| - Conjunctivitis                   |                                                                             |
| - Styes and chalazions             |                                                                             |
| - Trachoma                         |                                                                             |
| - Iritis and iridocyclitis         |                                                                             |
| Glaucoma                           |                                                                             |
| Glaucoma                           |                                                                             |
| Blindness                          |                                                                             |

### Disorders of the ear

| Condition                          | Description                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Earache                            |                                                                             |
| - Otitis externa                   |                                                                             |
| - Otitis media                     |                                                                             |
| Hearing loss and deafness          |                                                                             |
| - Otitis barotrauma                |                                                                             |
| - “Glue ear”                       |                                                                             |
| - Otosclerosis                     |                                                                             |
| - Chronic otitis media             |                                                                             |
| - Perceptive deafness              |                                                                             |
| Vertigo and dizziness              |                                                                             |
| Diabetes mellitus                  |                                                                             |
| - Hypoglycaemia                    |                                                                             |
| - Hyperglycaemia                   |                                                                             |
| Diabetes insipidus                 |                                                                             |

### Disorders of metabolism

| Condition                          | Description                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A headache                         |                                                                             |

### Diseases and disorders of the nervous system

- **Meningitis is important cause of severe headache** - the zero article denoting condition
- **Pressure inside the skull causes headache** - the zero article denoting condition
- **Failure of vision associated with headache** - the zero article denoting condition
- **A simple, occasional headache** - the indefinite article with a descriptive role
If headache is a feature of depression – the zero article denoting condition antidepressant drugs may help the headache – anaphoric ref. – direct to cure a tension headache – the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)

Then comes the headache: a severe throbbing pain – anaphoric ref. – indirect to eliminate other causes of the headache – anaphoric ref. – indirect followed by a serious headache – the indefinite article with a descriptive role

Headache is one of the conditions in which alternative therapies have had some success. – the zero article denoting condition

Worry about the migraine can bring on further attacks – the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)

A migraine may last several hours – the generic use of the indefinite article (any representative member of the class)

Viruses are a common cause of meningitis. The meningitis may be the only sign of infection – anaphoric ref. – direct

If the patient survives the initial stroke – anaphoric ref. – indirect

Disorders of the immune system

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)

An allergy and hypersensitivity

- Anaphylaxis

Sometimes the allergy can be associated with eating – anaphoric ref. – direct

substance that causes the allergy – anaphoric ref. – direct

Infections and Infestations

Bacterial infections

- Anthrax
- Cholera
- Typhoid fever
- Paratyphoid fever
- Tetanus (Lockjaw)
- Plague
- Leprosy
- Leptospirosis
- Psittacosis
- Viral infections
- Colds

The common cold can be cause – the generic use of the definite article (the class as represented by its typical specimen)
the severity of the col – the generic use of the definite article (the class
### Influenza
- Glandular fever
- Poliomyelitis
- Rabies (Hydrophobia)
- Smallpox
- Dengue fever
- Lassa fever
- Yellow fever

Ricketsia

### Fungi
Common childhood infections
- Measles
- German measles (Rubella)
- Scarlet fever
- Chickenpox
  (Varicella)
- Mumps
- Diphtheria
- Whooping cough

### Parasitic animals
- Parasitic protozoa
  - Malaria
  - Trypanosomiasis
  - Leishmaniasis
  - Toxoplasmosis
- Parasitic worms
  - Nematodes
    (Roundworms)
  - Trematodes
    (Flukes)
  - Cestodes
    (Tapeworms)

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### 4. Conclusions

There have been found several differences between the use of articles with illnesses and diseases as suggested in the grammar books and their actual use in The Family Medical Reference Book. Plague could serve as a typical example of such a difference: while in the grammar books the definite or indefinite article is recommended, it has not occurred in any instance in the analysed text. Many other examples are even more ambiguous.

Where the article with a particular illness is considered as unmarked, it is placed in the second column of the table. On the other hand, where the use of article is felt as marked, it is given in the third column with a suggested explanation.

As found in the analysed text, if an illness is understood as uncountable and `abstract` the zero article is preferred. On the contrary to this, if an illness or disorder is countable and somehow visible or touchable, the indefinite article is used (`a mole, a wart, a hernia, an aneurysm, an allergy`).

When the combination of the definite or indefinite article with an illness represents the whole class or any representative member the reference has been classified as generic.

If the name of an illness or disorder is mentioned earlier in the context or specified later in the context it is taken as a typical example of anaphoric (direct, indirect) or cataphoric reference.
In the instances where an illness is described in more details, the indefinite article is used and it is felt as nonreferring and have a descriptive role.

In the specific case of *headache* when it denotes a condition it is used with the zero article but when it denotes a single attack the indefinite article is preferred.

This was just an attempt to analyse the use of articles with the names of illnesses, diseases and disorders based on the content of *The Family Medical Reference Book*. We understand that the topic has not been covered in its full range and requires further investigation. This will hopefully be found in subsequent papers.

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