



Editorial

The use of acronyms in their proper measure

When correcting or reading an article, I find that it is more difficult to understand it the more acronyms that are present. What is the real need for their use in texts?

An acronym is the graphic abbreviation formed by the set of initial letters of a complex expression, according to the definition of the Real Academia Española. A symbol refers to the abbreviation of words, such as those in the metric system, that are common to several languages, such as m for meter, kg for kilogram, ml for milliliter or kV for kilovolt, or for definitions of time, such as a.m. or p.m., of the Latin expressions *ante meridiem* and *post meridiem* (before or after noon). An acronym is a type of acronym that can be pronounced as a word, for example, AIDS, an acronym for acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Acronyms must always be written in capital letters, without spaces or dots, without accents and without plurals. The right thing to write about non-governmental organizations (plural) is NGO, not NGOs. Their meaning should be defined the first time they are mentioned or, if they are books or reports, in a separate list, which usually appears at the beginning. The name or definition of the acronym should not be capitalized, unless it includes a proper name. For example, the definition of the acronym CT is computed tomography (with lowercase letters).

The creation and history of the acronyms probably goes back to the ancient Egyptians or Romans, who had to engrave their writings on stone. Today we often use them in colloquial spoken language and, of course, in the language of social networks, which is different from technical, scientific and legal written language, as is the case with medical records. If historically they have been used to write faster and to save ink, today, when speech recognition systems exist and printing is less and less used for scientific writing, these arguments lose their validity.

One of the drawbacks in their use is that they can have different meanings and, therefore, this can lead to a lack of understanding of what is being communicated

through them. To mention one example, the acronym ICU (UCI in Spanish) used in medical language for the term intensive care unit has other meanings. If we look it up on Google before the mentioned meaning, we see the real estate credit union (*unión de créditos inmobiliarios* in Spanish), the International Cycling Union (*Unión Ciclista Internacional* in Spanish) and also the University of California at Irvine.

Article 5 of Resolution 1995 of 1999 of the Ministry of Health states that the medical record “must be filled in clearly, legibly, without erasures, amendments, interleaving, without leaving blank spaces and without using acronyms” (italics added). The law uses as a valid argument “to stimulate the development of a quality information system, which would facilitate the performance of audit, surveillance and control tasks and contribute to better information for users”. In an audit or in the case of a lawsuit, the use of an acronym not known to the auditor or the judge may invalidate or give rise to misinterpretations of phrases or paragraphs in the medical record.

Another aspect that I do not consider justified is the creation of new abbreviations to describe a disease or a concept that is written in an article. The acronym should be used if it is going to be written frequently in writing, as in our specialty articles where the acronym MRI that stands for magnetic resonance imaging or CT for computed tomography. From the reader’s point of view, being in the middle of the article with a “newly created” acronym may mean going back to the first time it was mentioned to take up the phrase he did not understand.

On the other hand, the medical acronym does not mean the same thing in different languages: SNC (*sistema nervioso central*) is the commonly used acronym for central nervous system in Spanish, an expression that does not coincide with the acronym in English, CNS. Likewise, the acronym for cerebrospinal fluid acronym in Spanish is LCF (*líquido cefalorraquídeo*), which is completely different from the one used in English, CSF.

Thus, it is not so easy for a reader whose native language is not the language of writing to understand the acronyms of an article. Try reading an article in English that has 20 to 30 acronyms and that also deals with a topic you don't know much about.

Even in the same language, an acronym may have a different meaning in different countries. For a Colombian, the acronym IPS means health provider institution (institución prestadora de salud in Spanish), and for a Chilean, social security institute (Instituto de Previsión Social in Spanish).

The invitation is to use the acronyms in written language, which applies both to our radiological reports, which are part of the Colombian medical history, and to the one used in scientific articles. Let us use only the necessary acronyms, the universally known ones; it is not necessary to be an "acronym author". This will save the reader time and make reading a scientific article and the radiology report more enjoyable.



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