

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

Gerocultura

Coining a term for preventive medicine of aging, analogous to child care

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ABSTRACT

The author recounts how he coined the term "gerocultura," from the Greek root *gero* (elderly) plus *cultura* (nurture), to name a specialty devoted to healthy aging. The idea arose while he was preparing the inaugural lecture, in 2003, of a congress on anti-aging medicine. Inspired by his training in anatomy and by the anatomists' fascination with naming, he set up the mathematical analogy "puericulture is to pediatrics as X is to geriatrics," solving the X as gerocultura. He defines the concept as the set of means for ensuring healthy aging and quality of life in the elderly, equivalent to what the French call preventive gerontology. He also evokes Gilgamesh and humanity's age-old aspiration to overcome death, and, drawing on Prof. Salum's proposal, argues for care of the vernacular in the face of scientific anglicisms.

KEYWORDS: *gerocultura; aging; geriatrics; puericulture; quality of life; neologism*

Longevity is still a doubtful conquest; quality of life is already a guaranteed one.

Gerocultura, a word of Greek root *gero* = elderly + *cultura* (nurture), designates the name of a new specialty that arises to address an old problem. This term came to me while studying the material pertinent to the invitation from the president of the BRAZILIAN ACADEMY OF ANTI-AGING MEDICINE, DR. KOSE HORIBE, to deliver the inaugural lecture of the III INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM and I BRAZILIAN CONGRESS OF ANTI-AGING MEDICINE, coordinated by DRA. EDITH KAWANO HORIBE, to be held on 12 September 2003, in São Paulo, on *Reflections on Aging*, with particular emphasis on the quality of life of the elderly.

Considering that my initiation into academic life, up to earning my doctorate, took place in the Department of Anatomy of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of São Paulo under PROF. RENATO LOCCHI, and that by this privilege I am a founding member of the Brazilian Society of Anatomy, I was touched by the fascination that every anatomist feels for giving names. Thus, on this occasion, after reflecting on the matter, I sought to define the period, over the course of a human being's life, on which attention should be focused in order to ensure

healthy old age. It occurred to me to draw an analogy between *geriatrics* and *pediatrics*, imagining a symmetry. In this comparison arose the idea of correlating it with *puericulture* (child care). I therefore set up a rule of three and placed the X of the question in the slot for which I intended to find the appropriate name. The mathematical representation of the question took the following form:

Puericulture : pediatrics :: X : geriatrics

At this point, the X remained to be defined. RAMIZ GALVÃO came to my aid, where I found the Greek root for old age: *gero*. Now, with half the word found, the final part was still missing, and it came through the mirror image of *puericulture*. The value of X had been discovered = *gero* + *cultura*. The final representation was as follows:

Puericulture : pediatrics :: Gerocultura : geriatrics, or, in simplified form, $P : p :: G : g$

Gerocultura was born today, 19 June 2003. As its creation process derived from *puericulture*, it is worth recalling that this word came by way of French and was entered into the dictionary 134 years ago, in 1869.

Although "baptized" today, with the recording of this name in this document, I recall that its meaning represents an aspiration of humanity, expressed five millennia ago when GILGAMESH (3000 B.C.) in Mesopotamia consul-

ted a sage on how to conquer death. The sage advised him: first conquer sleep for seven days and seven nights; having thus overcome the barrier of sleep, you will be able to secure longevity.

Gerocultura is the set of means to be employed to ensure healthy aging and thus guarantee the quality of life of the elderly. It is what the French call *preventive gerontology*, as a way of preventing pathological aging, or better, of preventing diseased aging, since pathology is not disease but the study of disease, which, in my view, should instead be called *preventive geriatrics*; *mutatis mutandis*, it is to do for the elderly what puericulture does for the child.

Several decades ago, PROF. ISAAC NICOLAU SALUM of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo felt the difficulty scientists have in translating many English expressions into Portuguese, going so far as to use them untranslated. This anglicism reaches the point of forgetting expressions such as *diapositivos* in favor of *slide*, a flagrant disrespect toward the vernacular. In view of this, PROF. SALUM proposed to USP the creation of a committee of linguists, within EDUSP, to receive foreign words from the scientific

community, indicate their meaning, and then propose a translation, euphonious and fitting, which, once accepted by scientists, could be entered into the dictionary.

My suggestion is strengthened by the fact that the ORTHOGRAPHIC VOCABULARY OF THE PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE, published by the BRAZILIAN ACADEMY OF LETTERS in 1998, includes the Greek root *gero* and words beginning with it, therefore officially entered into the dictionary, such as, for example, *gerocomia*, from *gero*, elderly + *komia*, to care for, meaning to care for the elderly, denoting the hygiene of the aged.

I present this to the medical community, and particularly to those who take an interest in, study, and publish in the field of those who seek to improve the quality of life of the elderly, and I propose this neologism to mean giving the elderly the time to "grow wise before growing old," and thus to answer SHAKESPEARE's question, *why have you grown old before growing wise?*

I ask my colleagues to discuss and adopt whatever they see fit. This is my suggestion, subject to better judgment.