Salt: friend or foe?

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Renaming schizophrenia in South Korea

In January, 2012, the Korean Neuropsychiatric Association changed the original Korean term for schizophrenia, jungshinbunyeolbyung (mind-split disorder), to johyeonbyung (attunement disorder), to dispel the stigma associated with the name. Johyeon literally means "to tune a stringed musical instrument". In the context of schizophrenia, attunement is a metaphor for tuning the strings of the mind. It was inspired by a Buddhist text written by a South Korean monk in 1579: "As a stringed instrument maintains its own sounds with appropriate tension, the human mind also needs adequate tuning to maintain its functions." Thus, johyeonbyung metaphorically implies that schizophrenia is a brain disorder in which the neural circuitry is inadequately tuned.

Jungshinbunyeol was translated from the Japanese word using Chinese characters in 1937, and its literal meaning is "mind-split".

The term had a substantial effect in South Korea, where personal honour is an important part of the culture and is highly valued. Patients with schizophrenia and their relatives felt shame because of the literal meaning of the disease name. The prejudice associated with the name prevented patients from seeking help early. In 2002, the Japanese changed their term for schizophrenia from seishin-bunretsu-byo (mind-split disorder) to togo-shitcho-sho (integration-ataxia or dysfunction disorder) because of the same problems. The use of the new term clearly increased the frequency with which patients were given the diagnosis and consented to treatment.1 The new term might still be problematic, however, because a new type of the stigma might be associated with the negative word "ataxia or dysfunction", being included in the new term.

The term jungshinbunyeolbyung is readily understood without further explanation, whereas the term johyeonbyung is not immediately comprehensible to South Koreans and thus needs an explanation in terms of the semantics. The situation is analogous to that for Eugen Bleuler’s contemporaries, who could not have understood the meaning of the word "schizophrenia" unless the Greek roots were explained. This change helps to avoid the stigmatisation derived from the name of the disorder. A South Korean study showed that the term johyeonbyung induced significantly less prejudice and stigma than did the term jungshinbunyeolbyung.2

Johyeonbyung is a metaphorical term that signifies present scientific thinking, which regards schizophrenia as a neural network disorder. Cultural differences in illness-related behaviour exist between countries. Consideration of the sociopsychological context in determining an appropriate name for schizophrenia is essential for the holistic management of the disorder. We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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