

Mayday!

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I've always been a fan of words. When I was young, I'd spend hours browsing through a 20-pound unabridged dictionary that gave the histories of words as well as their meanings. I've just recently found out why people shout "Mayday" when their ship or plane is in trouble. It's a misspelling of the French, "m'aidez" which means "help me," and is pronounced "mayday." Well, today, I'd like to shout "MAYDAY" for help with my words.

I've worked 30 years in long-term care. Over that time, I've come to realize that much of the language we use is in need of replacement because it unintentionally demeans people, contributing to a hierarchical sense of "us and them" or a dehumanizing institutional culture instead of a nurturing community with respect for its members.

When I started working in long-term care in 1972, I worked in a "State School and Hospital" with "inmates" who were called "retarded" and categorized as "moron," "idiot," "imbecile," "mongoloid." Those words were not intended as insults, just diagnoses. We've already come a long way from there, but we still have far to go. And those of us who came from a past that accepted words like these need help—your help—to upgrade our institutionalized brains.

Part of transforming long-term care practice is finding new words to describe staff, programs, parts of the building, and the "industry" itself. As I've attended Pioneer and Eden conferences, I've been immersed in a new type of language called "person-centered." The idea behind person-centered language is to acknowledge and respect long-term care residents as individuals. Using person-centered language, I've learned, is often as simple as reversing common phrases to put the person first and the characteristic second. "A wheelchair-bound resident," for instance, becomes "a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility," and "a feeder" becomes "someone who needs assistance with dining."

Earlier this year, I wrote an article about this subject for *Provider* magazine and invited readers to e-mail me words and phrases they thought were outdated, along with their suggestions for what to use instead. Look at the word "therapy," for instance. Why does everything have to be therapy once you live in a nursing home? If I liked to paint before I moved into the nursing home and I paint now that I'm there, why is my hobby now "art therapy?" I mean no insult to the wonderful folks who call themselves therapists and their work, their special training, or their skills. In fact, I'm a massage therapist myself. But in this context, "therapy" is another of those separating words.

This list below is a collection of suggestions culled from the many responses I received from readers of *Provider*, along with some additions from friends and colleagues and a few thoughts of my own. The list is not definitive, and I am not its keeper. It's not up to me to say whether these words are our best or only choices, but I do know they're a start, so I'm sharing them in hopes that they'll spur more thinking and discussion. If you have words to add to the list, please send them to the Pioneer Network. Entries will be posted on the Pioneer Web site.

The language of long-term care belongs to all of us—not only the "us" who work in this field but, at least as importantly, the elders and others with disabilities who require long-term care services, their families, and the public at large. The most urgent task we face may be agreeing which "bad" old words to throw away.

Finding new ones should be easier. After all, that's just a matter of choosing words that are both accurate and respectful, and that unabridged dictionary is full of good words.

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Suggestions for a New Vocabulary

Old word: "victim of . . ." or "suffering from . . ."
Suggestions: "has . . ." or "with . . ."

Old word: wing, unit
Suggestions: household, street, neighborhood, avenue

Old word: allow
Suggestions: encourage, welcome

Old word: diaper
Suggestions: pad, brief, disposable brief, brand names, incontinence garment

Old word: the elderly
Suggestions: elders; older adults, people, or individuals

Old word: patient
Suggestions: resident (some think this is passé), individual, elder

Old word: a feeder/the feeders, feeder table
Suggestions: person who needs/ people who need assistance with dining, dining table

Old word: a diabetic, a quad, a CVA
Suggestions: a person who has (whatever condition)

Old word: nurse aide, CNA, nursing assistant, front line staff (sounds like war)
Suggestions: resident assistant, certified resident assistant

Old word: admit, place
Suggestions: move in

Old word: discharge
Suggestions: move out

Old word: lobby, common area
Suggestions: living room, parlor, foyer

Old word: nurses' station
Suggestions: work area, desk

Old word: facility, institution, nursing home
Suggestions: home, life center, living center

Old word: 100-bed facility
Suggestions: 100 people live in this home/center

Old word: housekeeping, housekeepers
Suggestions: environmental services, homemakers

Old word: long-term care industry
Suggestions: long-term care profession or field

Old word: eloped, escaped, elopement
Suggestions: left the building, unescorted exiting

Old word: dietary services, food service
Suggestions: dining services

Old word: problem residents, behavior problems
Suggestions: person with behavioral symptoms

Old word: agitated
Suggestions: active, communicating distress

Old word: ambulation, wandering
Suggestions: walking