
Musings

Warfare and health care

The sign says “Materiels Department.” It is on the fifth floor of Roberts Hospital in Baylor University Medical Center. The department opened in its newly constructed space on July 1, 2006.

Wait a minute. Should the word be *materiel* or *material*? *The Oxford American Dictionary* lists the following definitions:

materiel n. materials and equipment used in warfare.

material n. the substance or things from which something is or can be made or with which something is done. . . .

So how did Baylor University Medical Center end up with *materiel* in the name of a department? Terry Worsham, the director of the department, recalls that the early directors, Lee Majewski and Jessie Freeman, both had previous careers in the military and are responsible for the spelling. Terry also relates that, to his knowledge, we are the only department in the country to use the “military spelling,” which leads to interesting conversations at national conventions.

The Materiels Department is responsible for stocking and distributing over 11,000 items to the hospital. Everything from syringes to bedpans to intravenous solutions are ordered, temporarily stored, and then distributed to the operating rooms and floors in a timely fashion. Efficient organization is required so as to minimize time on a shelf and optimize delivery to the nurses, doctors, and other health care workers involved in patient care. Significant cost savings also accrue with bulk pricing and direct shipments from factories.

So, if other hospitals in this country, including others in the Baylor Health Care System, spell it one way, and Baylor University Medical Center spells it another, who is correct?

Further research suggests tolerance. The word under discussion originated from the French and indeed concerned military supplies. The definition, however, has broadened through the years:

The equipment, apparatus, and supplies of a military force or organization. —*The American Heritage College Dictionary*

The stock-in-trade, available means, or resources, for carrying on any business or undertaking. Used as a collective term for the articles, supplies, machinery, etc. used in an army, navy, or business, as distinguished from the personnel or body of persons employed. —*Oxford English Dictionary*

The equipment, apparatus, and supplies used by an organization or institution or required in some work or enterprise, especially military equipment, apparatus, and supplies (as guns, ammunition, clothing). —*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

Physicians have been known to talk about “waging a war against disease,” “conquering illnesses,” “plucking the patient from the jaws of death,” and “battling the enemy” (cancer, heart disease, pestilence).

Perhaps our Materiels Department is appropriately named after all.

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