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How We Talk About People with Conditions: Trends Over Time Using Google Ngrams

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Background: People first language (PFL) involves referring to a person separately from one's condition. The Obesity Action Coalition supports "People-First Language for Obesity" as more respectful to individuals. However, PFL can make for awkward prose and may make clinically relevant terms seem stigmatizing.

Methods: Trends in descriptions of four conditions (asthma, autism, diabetes, and obesity) were investigated using the Google Book nGram Viewer (GBNV). GBNV includes millions of books tagged with parts-of-speech. Five categories of descriptors were investigated: condition-defining ("diabetics"), condition-adjective ("obese patients"), PFLadjective ("women who are autistic"), PFL-neutral ("men who have asthma"), and PFL-negative ("girls suffering from obesity"). Each descriptor-condition pair was investigated in the English GBNV corpus from 1800-2008 (latest year available). Data were extracted using GBNV and custom R code, and visualized using adaptations to the GBNV interface.

Results: The proportion of books referring to these four conditions increased 30 fold over 200 years, with diabetes having the greatest increase. The use of PFL-neutral language increased over time, particularly since 1980, for all conditions except obesity. People with obesity are consistently referred to with PFL-adjective and condition-adjective language. Condition-defining language was used to describe people with diabetes more than other conditions, with a notable decrease in condition-defining language since 1980.

Conclusions: Language used in books to describe individuals and their conditions has varied markedly across time and among conditions. How these changes are related to condition stigma over time is unclear from these data and should be further studied.