I Am Not a “Provider”

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Although a generic term for professionals who take care of patients might be expedient, many find the term “provider” to be quite offensive. History shows that calling a medical professional a provider is a professional insult.

The term was first used by the German Third Reich to devalue and demean Jewish physicians as medical professionals (1). Jewish physicians were not allowed to refer to themselves as “arzt” (translated as “doctor”), but instead had to use the word “behandler,” which roughly translates to “provider.” Along with the humiliation of this imposed term, these physicians endured other professional restrictions in the 1930s. They could not hang out a shingle and could not prescribe medicines to patients who were not Jewish.

“Provider” is not the only demeaning term in the health care field. In the United States, nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs) play crucial roles in health care delivery, both generally and for people with diabetes specifically; yet, they are often referred to as “mid-levels.” I have witnessed how upset my colleagues from these professions become when referred to in this way. The term “mid-level” disrespects their professional position, and their justifiable response to the diminution of their role is easy to understand. “Prescriber” is another demeaning term that effectively reflects a limited value assigned to the health care professionals to whom it refers.

What are more appropriate terms? We could simply refer to each role individually by its true name, such as “physician,” “NP,” and “PA.” If a collective term is needed, then perhaps “clinicians” would suffice. If there is some compelling reason to use the acronym HCP, we should make clear that it stands for “health care professional” rather than “health care provider.”

Whichever terms are used, they should respect and reflect the training, scope, and responsibilities that define our professional roles. Words matter.

DUALITY OF INTEREST

No potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article were reported.

REFERENCE

1. Al-Agba N. If you call me a provider, I will assume you are a Nazi. Available from https://thedeductible.com/2019/02/08/if-you-call-me-a-provider-i-will-assume-you-are-a-nazi. Accessed 18 January 2021