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Dear Editor

### Non-tuberculous Mycobacteria

The informative paper by Hosker *et al.* (1) on the prevalence of 'pulmonary infection due to non-tuberculous mycobacteria' in Hong Kong provides an occasion for drawing attention to the verbal confusions arising from the illogical decision to adopt the specific name '*tuberculosis*' for the species of mycobacterium most commonly associated with tuberculosis in the human subject. In colloquial discourse, this organism has been called the human tubercle bacillus with clarity and propriety, and it is regrettable that this term was not translated into Latin as *Mycobacterium hominis* in the formal terminology of the mycobacteria.

We should not confuse a disease with its own cause. 'Tuberculosis' currently refers to a disease characterized by granulomatous changes caused by a mycobacterium. This diagnosis places the patient in a category with defining characteristics in two fields, morbid anatomy and aetiology. A complete diagnostic statement would include identification of the causal mycobacterium. When a diagnosis of tuberculosis, unspecified, is made in man it is implied that the causal organism is thought, or has been shown, to be the human tubercle bacillus. In the days when disease caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* was important in man, it was referred to as bovine tuberculosis, implying with perfect clarity a disease caused by the species of mycobacterium most commonly causing disease in cattle. The adoption of the name *hominis* for the

species most prevalent in the human race would have been logical and convenient, and would not have implied that only the disease caused by this species is properly called tuberculosis in man, leaving granulomatous diseases caused in man by other species of mycobacteria in limbo (2).

With this terminology, the phrase 'Pulmonary infection by mycobacteria other than *M. hominis*' would have indicated clearly the subject of the Hong Kong paper without suggesting that some other name should be found for morbid-anatomical tuberculosis caused by other species of mycobacteria.

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### References

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2. Scadding JG. Nomenclature of mycobacterial disease. *Am Rev Respir Dis* 1987; **136**: 1308–1309.

### Reply to Prof Scadding

We thank Professor Scadding for his interest in our work and share his concerns regarding the confusion regarding terminology for Mycobacterial disease.

Our use of the term non-tuberculous mycobacteria was chosen as the one most widely used at the present time to describe Mycobacteria, other than *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.

We look forward to the time when a definitive terminology is agreed by all scientists and clinicians.

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