



The Language of Culture Change

"Mayday"

by Karen Schoeneman

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."

A few years ago 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article about this subject for Provider magazine and invited readers to e-mail me words and phrases they thought were outdated, along with their suggestions for what to use instead.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 Christie.Dobson@PioneerNetwork.net the Pioneer Network. Entries will be added below.

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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Old Word	Suggestions
"victim of . . ." or "suffering from . . ."	"has . . ." or "with . . ."
wing, unit	household, street, neighborhood, avenue
allow	encourage, welcome
diaper	pad, brief, disposable brief, brand names, incontinence garment
the elderly	elders; older adults, people, or individuals
patient	resident (some think this is passé), individual, elder
a feeder/the feeders, feeder table	person who needs/ people who need assistance with dining, dining table
a diabetic, a quad, a CVA	a person who has (whatever condition)
nurse aide, CNA, nursing assistant, front line staff (sounds like war)	resident assistant, certified resident assistant
admit, place	move in
discharge	move out
lobby, common area	living room, parlor, foyer
nurses' station	work area, desk
facility, institution, nursing home	home, life center, living center
100-bed facility	100 people live in this home/center
housekeeping, housekeepers	environmental services, homemakers
long-term care industry	long-term care profession or field
eloped, escaped, elopement	left the building, unescorted exiting
dietary services, food service	dining services
problem residents, behavior problems	person with behavioral symptoms
agitated	active, communicating distress
ambulation, wandering	walking

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More words.....

People	Grandma, Mommy, Kid, Sweetie, Honey, Girls, old Timer	Resident's name/ Mr./Mrs./Ms.
	Wheelchairs/Walkers	People who use a wheelchair/walker
	The Elderly	Elders
	Bed (i.e. - A 100-bed facility)	Resident
	Residents Identified by Diagnosis	Their name -- Learn it!
	Wanderers	People who like to walk
	Disabled	Person needing support/ What their abilities are
	Toilet Resident	needs help in the bathroom
	Activity Director	Community Life Coordinator
	Non-nursing/Ancillary staff	(name) from (department)
	New Admit	Someone offered a home here, New Neighbor
	Feeder/Feedy	Person who needs help eating
	Patient	Resident, Participant, Client, Neighbor
	Resident	My Friend

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	Dementia/Demented	Person with cognitive losses
	Girl, Guy (CNA)	Their name, My Friend
	I	We/ The Team
	Food Service Worker, Hey You	Their Name
Places	Facility, Nursing Home	Community, Home, Care Community, Life Center
	Agency	Supplemental Staffing
	Bath	Spa
	Ward	Village
	Nurses' Station	Work Station, Den, Support Room
	Storeroom	Pantry
	Solarium	Living room
	Unit	Neighborhood
	Tray Line	Fine Dining
Things	Activities	Meaningful things to do
	Mechanical Soft Food	Chopped Food
	Nourishment	Snack
	Bibs	Napkin, Clothing Protector
	Diaper, Pampers, Pull-ups	Briefs, Panties, Attends
	Hospital Gown	Pajamas, Nightgown
Actions	Transport	Assist to...
	Admit/Place	Move in
	Ambulate	Walk
	MIA, Elopement	Taking a walk
	Toileting	Using the bathroom
	Baby-sit	Resident interaction
	Allow	Help/Facilitate
	Claims	States, Says
Attitudes	You are fat	You are thick or curvy
	Care Plan Problem	Resident Strength
	"I didn't know my resident could do that."	"I love it when my resident does that!"
	Problem	Challenge/Opportunity
	"You need to..."	"Would you like to...?"
	"Sit down, you'll fall."	"Let's walk!"
	"Trays are here."	"Dinner is served."/ "It's dinnertime!"
	"He's on the pot."	"He's not available right now."
	Long-Term Care Industry	Long-Term Care Community
	A two-assist	requires two helpers
	"We're already doing that."	"We need to REALLY do that."
	"We tried that."	"Let's try again."
	"That's not my job."	"I'll take care of that."
	Industry	Mission
	14-hour rule	Freedom of Choice
	Old ways	Change in order
	Can't escape	Would like to go outside
Conditions	Short-staffed	Adequate staffing
	Confined to wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair

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