

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# Medical Thrashing Mad: The Language of Medicine as Death Metal Lyrics

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To the Editor:

Heavy metal music emerged largely from the industrial landscape of England after the Second World War. Compared to the psychedelic music that characterized the 1960s, heavy metal has a more sinister sound, as exemplified by the songs of bands such as Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple. The lyrics of heavy metal concern occult religious practices, sexual excess, substance abuse, and other controversial issues. In the late 1970s, the popularity of heavy metal waned as punk rock emerged. However, heavy metal experienced a resurgence in the early 1980s with the "New Wave of British Heavy Metal," which was characterized by "high-soaring vocals, dual guitar work, and increasingly complex song arrangements", with bands such as Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Motörhead at the forefront. In the early 1980s, California-based bands made heavy metal more commercially appealing by projecting a flamboyant image and incorporating pop hooks into their songs, and thereby gave rise to the subgenre of glam metal. The members of these bands sported long hair and an androgynous look.<sup>1</sup>

However, some musicians viewed this commercialization of heavy metal as antithetical to its "underground" roots. In response to glam metal, several subgenres emerged in the early 1980s: thrash metal, black metal, and death metal.<sup>1</sup> The term "death metal" was coined in 1983 by members of the Swiss heavy metal band Hellhammer, who started a fanzine called *Death Metal*. By the mid-1980s, death metal had become a distinct subgenre of heavy metal.<sup>1</sup>

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The lyrics and iconography of death metal portray themes of horror, gore, and environmental and social decay.<sup>1</sup> Some lyrics sung by death metal bands describe dismemberment and grotesque bodily functions vividly<sup>2</sup> and reflect the trend among death metal bands to use the destruction of the body as a theme in their lyrics.<sup>3</sup> Implementing medical terminology enables these bands to express this theme more explicitly. Carcass, an influential death metal band, is known for incorporating medical jargon into their lyrics. This practice is exemplified by song titles such as "Excoriating Abdominal Emanation"<sup>4</sup> and "Swarming Vulgar Mass of Infected Virulency."<sup>5</sup> In their album *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988), the band uses medical terminology to describe decaying bodies and botched forensic procedures.<sup>4</sup>

In a 1991 interview with *Spin* magazine, guitarist Bill Steer, a founding member of Carcass, suggested that the utilization of medical jargon enables his band to express macabre ideas without losing sight of the realities in which those ideas are rooted and thereby avoid what he considered the sensationalism of death metal bands desiring only to shock their audiences.<sup>4</sup> The early work of Carcass was instrumental in the development of a subgenre of death metal known as "goregrind." The Swedish bands General Surgery and Rurgitate are examples of goregrind bands that have mimicked Carcass by incorporating medical jargon into their lyrics and song titles.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Carcass is demonstrated in the work of other death metal bands, such as the California-based bands Pathology<sup>6</sup> and the County Medical Examiners, the latter being comprised of three men who all graduated from medical school.<sup>7</sup>

Just as medical eponyms reflect moments of discovery in the history of medicine, the employment of medical jargon by death metal bands reflects a period of aesthetic innovation in the history of heavy metal music. The art of medicine demands of its practitioners a mastery of the language of medicine, and the authors hope that healthcare professionals unfamiliar with the history of heavy metal music can appreciate the role that the language of medicine has played in the development of this controversial art form.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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