

Position on Terminology for Vancomycin Flushing Reactions

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Position:

The Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), its HIV Medicine Association (HIVMA), the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA), the Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society (PIDS) and the Society of Infectious Diseases Pharmacists (SIDP) support universal removal of the slur “red man syndrome” and recommend replacing it with “vancomycin infusion reaction,”¹ a term that emphasizes pathophysiology over visual appearance on skin. We suggest the following concrete actions:

- Remove all variations of this terminology and replace with “vancomycin infusion reaction” for the following:
 - Documentation in the electronic health record;
 - Teaching of trainees, including but not limited to: medical students, nurses, pharmacists and other allied health professionals;
 - Official documents, including but not limited to: teaching aids, textbooks, job aids, guidelines and position statements;
 - All communications, both written and verbal.

This term will help direct understanding and management of the reaction, which is not an allergy and is managed with an infusion modification. More importantly, this change recognizes the harm caused by this hurtful term perpetuated by the medical community and serves as an initial step toward supporting equitable medical care for our patients of Indigenous American heritage.

Rationale:

Our Societies, whose membership constitutes individuals dedicated to the treatment, control and eradication of infectious diseases, support the universal removal and replacement of the term “red man syndrome,” a term previously used to describe the syndrome of histamine release caused by rapid infusion of vancomycin and the erythematous flushing that results in patients with light skin. Our Societies support the replacement of this racist terminology with “vancomycin infusion reaction.”

The epithet “red man” has been used as a slur to derogatorily refer to persons of Indigenous American descent since the 1600s.¹ Over the course of the colonization of the New World, Indigenous Americans went from being systematically targeted and removed from their native lands to becoming nearly invisible to the collective American consciousness. This functional erasure of Indigenous American peoples from contemporary American society has led to inherent institutional racism throughout various aspects of public life, including the medical establishment. As a result, persons of native descent have worse health outcomes, with increased rates of mood disorders, substance abuse and preventable diseases and ensuing increased mortality.¹

One small step we can take toward dismantling this shameful inheritance is to expunge offensive terminology from our lexicon as we seek to build trust with and improve care in this population.

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1. Santiago Alvarez-Arango, MD, S. Michelle Ogunwole, MD, Thomas D. Sequist, MD, MPH, Caitlin M. Burk, MD, and Kimberly G. Blumenthal MD. Vancomycin Infusion Reaction — Moving beyond “Red Man Syndrome.” *N Engl J Med* 2021; 384:1283-1286 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp2031891
2. Austin JP, Foster BA, Empey A. Replace Red Man Syndrome With Vancomycin Flushing Reaction. *Hosp Pediatr*. 2020;10(7):623-624. DOI:10.1542/hpeds.2020-0125.
3. Bradford A. “Red Man Syndrome:” Thoughts on an anachronistic term. *Family Medicine*. 2013; 45(7):509-510.