Breathlessness/Dyspnoea

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Though often signifying lung or heart disease, 'breathlessness' is not rare in neurological practice, though intracranial causes are relatively uncommon. Writers, and especially medical, scientific and technical writers, are continually admonished to use plain and simple words, and to prefer the short to the long word. 'Breathlessness' is a simpler more descriptive word than 'dyspnoea'. The Old English (9th century) *braeth* meant an 'odour, smell or exhalation'. As with many English words the sense changed with time. In ancient use it meant 'heated air expired from the lungs' (often manifest to the sense of smell), as in 'strong breath'. It did not appear in common use until the 15th century:

'She was so hoorse and so brethles that on hire feet myght she not stonde' (1450 Merlin xviii. 299).

Breathless came to signify 'breathing with difficulty, panting or out of breath'. This meaning remains. Thus, the poet Rupert Brooke in *The Hill*:

'Breathless, we flung us on the windy hill,
Laughed in the sun, and kissed the lovely grass.'

It is one of many words that have alternative meanings that may appear and disappear, or alter with passing time. Breathlessness could also signify 'languid lifelessness or

exhaustion'. It also carries a hint of anticipated excitement. Shakespeare often shows the brilliant knack of using the same word twice, each with different meaning, in a single sentence:

'Kneeling before this ruin of sweete life, and breathing to his breathlesse excellence the incense of a vow' (Shakespeare, John iv. iii. 66).

'Holding one's breath in awe or expectation', is yet another usage, shown in Wordsworth's sonnet *It Is a Beauteous Evening*:

'It is a beauteous Evening calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a nun,
Breathless with adoration.'

Yet another apparently contrary meaning is 'unstirred by a breath of wind'. Wordsworth again, in *Evening Volunt*:

'The Mere seems firm as solid crystal, breathless, clear, and motionless.'

And, it has been used as a metaphor: *The Breathlessness of Death* (in John Donne's sermons).

But, the plain English terms – breathlessness or shortness of breath – are uncommon in medical texts and papers, where dyspnoea is sadly preferred.