“Toxicity” vs. “toxic effect”: Which is better?

Is it correct to use the word toxicity when referring to a treatment’s toxic effect in the body? Consider these sentences:

The most common toxicities reported were fatigue and diarrhea.
No grade 3 toxicities occurred.

According to the AMA Manual of Style, such usage is incorrect. As the manual explains, “Toxicity is the quality, state, or degree of being poisonous. A patient is not toxic. A patient does not have toxicity.”
Preferred wording would be toxic effect, toxic reaction, or adverse effect.

Preferred:
The most common toxic reactions reported were fatigue and diarrhea.
No grade 3 toxic effects occurred.
The toxicity of the drug combination was studied.

In practice, the use of toxicity to mean toxic effect has become more frequent since we wrote a posting about this topic a decade ago. We suspect that the common usage will eventually be considered acceptable by the AMA Manual. In the meantime, because this manual is the leading stylebook for biomedical publishing, and because many journals adhere to it, we recommend following its guidance to use toxic effect. However, if you choose to use toxicity, you won’t be misunderstood.

Reference

—Sunita Patterson