Word for Word

Issue or problem?

The word *issue* has taken on a new meaning over the past several years. When we hear that someone has *issues*, we immediately know that that person at the very least has something that should be remedied. People have used *issue* to mean *problem* so often that it is now one of Webster’s definitions of *issue*. But is *issue* sufficient when describing a *problem* in academic and biomedical writing?

The problem with *issue* is that it is not as specific as *problem* and can be interpreted in more ways. Take a look at the following two sentences and see if one is more informative than the other.

**Examples**
High cholesterol is an issue among baby boomers.
High cholesterol is a problem among baby boomers.

In the first sentence, high cholesterol MAY be a *problem*, but we don’t know for sure. We do know it in the second sentence. Here’s another comparison.

**Examples**
What’s the issue with this treatment plan?
What’s the problem with this treatment plan?

In the first question, the *issue* may be something innocuous, negative, or even positive. In the second question, the speaker is looking for something detrimental.

Another problem is that *issue* also has more definitions than *problem* does.
Examples
This blog covers many issues related to biomedical writing.
I received the latest issue of the journal.
Your physician may issue a warning about your dietary habits.
The patient had an issue of blood.

In contrast, a problem is a negative or distressing matter or question that must be handled or answered. Problem also is used to describe a mathematical question.

Another factor is whether to use either word at all in certain instances. Both issue and problem can be unclear and wordy when you’re describing something in a biomedical article.

Examples
Correct but wordy: An issue regarding clinical trials of this treatment is the problem of a lack of eligible control subjects.
Better: Clinical trials of this treatment are hindered by a lack of eligible control subjects.

References

--Don Norwood

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