Setting the stage for the correct use of person-first language

The use of person-first language in biomedical writing is intended to emphasize the distinction between a diagnosis, disease, or disability and the person who has it. Thus, the convention in academic and scientific writing is to prefer, for example, patients with cancer over cancer patients or people with schizophrenia over schizophrenics.

Similarly, information about a patient’s diagnosis and prognosis, such as cancer staging, should clearly refer to the cancer, not the patient. Compound adjectives such as advanced-stage or stage IIB should therefore not be used to describe patient.

Incorrect: EGFR K858R substitutions were identified in 10% of early-stage patients with non-small cell lung cancer.

Correct: EGFR K858R substitutions were identified in 10% of patients with early-stage non-small cell lung cancer.
**Incorrect:** Breast tumor samples were obtained from 112 stage III patients.

**Correct:** Breast tumor samples were obtained from 112 patients with stage III disease.

Likewise, biomedical writers should avoid saying that a patient was a stage; instead, a patient has a cancer, tumor, or disease of a particular stage or TNM category.³

**Incorrect:** Of 218 women with cervical cancer, 23% were stage IIB or higher.

**Correct:** Of 218 women with cervical cancer, 23% had stage IIB or higher disease.

**Incorrect:** The patients included in the trial were M0.

**Correct:** In the included patients, the M category was M0.

**Also correct:** The patients included in the trial had no distant metastasis.

**References**


—Amy Ninetto

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