

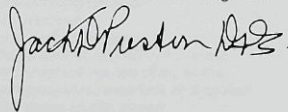
Average vs Normal

As the readers of this column must undoubtedly know by now, the use of words and the fashioning of word structures holds a great attraction to the Editor-in-Chief of this journal. I frequently find myself in conversation with others so attracted, discussing propriety use and individual preferences. The nuances of the English language are endless, and there is often no right or wrong to some of the questions concerning which is the better term or form to use. Language evolves differently in various geographic areas, cultures, and subcultures. Some of us are more reluctant to accept such evolutionary changes than others, and some evolved uses or meanings are only transient. Esoteric terms contrived by certain disciplines and serving no greater purpose should be shunned.

Widespread use does not by itself justify the acceptance of a term. One needs only to listen to contemporary teenage jargon to validate this statement. The vocabulary of one's profession also evolves, abruptly at times, as new procedures or materials are accepted. Most specialty groups have an accepted source to which they turn for validation or repudiation of terms and meanings. In prosthodontics, the Glossary of Prosthodontic Terms is the accepted resource, and periodic revision of this document has continued to improve and modernize it. It is unfortunate, however, that there is a lack of interdisciplinary acceptance of the definitions that are used. The Glossary of Prosthodontic Terms is derived by consensus of opinion of a large body of prosthodontic organizations and individuals, and is a reasonable resource that has gained international acceptance within our specialty. It is unfortunate that this standard is not shared by other disciplines, or even used consistently within our own specialty and publications. The use of the term "fixture" is an obvious illustration of disregard for propriety as stated in the Glossary, and of the point that frequency of use does not necessarily constitute propriety. Astute readers (and many authors) can attest to the fact that this term is not used in the IJP in relationship to implant dentistry. I use this term only as an example; there are many others that I am sure readers could cite from their own preferences.

There are two words, however, that are not defined in the Glossary of Prosthodontic Terms and are frequently improperly interchanged, leading to misunderstanding and, sometimes, to the perpetuation of fallacy. These words are "normal" and "average." When dealing with the human being, confusion between the two can be very dangerous. Average function or response is not always normal. For example, it is often contested that the normal pulse rate is 72 beats per minute. That this is the average is generally accepted. Average body weight and normal body weight may be greatly different. To the practitioner who finds that the gingival margins around complete-coverage restorations are frequently inflamed, this may be considered an average response, and therefore, may be expected and considered a normal reaction to the intervention. Any knowledgeable practitioner would contest such a conclusion. Patients with elevated blood pressure may come to accept this as normal when in fact their average elevated blood pressure may be hazardous to their survival. The danger is that those who practice in a restricted environment and fail to take advantage of continuing education opportunities may also become hazardous to their patients' health. What is average in such a practice may not be normal or healthy. Those of us who are mentors in dental schools must continue to strive to ensure that the difference between average and normal is stressed in our students' educations.

In this, as in so many other aspects of our lives, as we think, we speak—and often as we speak, we act. There can be no justification for any confusion between these two important words, and the two must be clearly separated. Whether dealing with terms, patients, politics, or any other aspect of our lives, a clear distinction must be made between average and normal.



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