Liver Disease: Fifty Shades of Yellow

March 30, 2015 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Note: *April Fool's Day is soon, so here's a bit of levity for the liver. Keep your expectations low, and you won't be disappointed.*

When I was hospitalized for liver failure in 1988, the hospital gowns were yellow. Blondes don't usually look good in yellow, especially when jaundiced. My doctor strolled in and said, "We have to find a different color hospital gown for you." (While on the subject of hospital gowns...What do insurance plans and hospital gowns have in common? Answer: They both give the illusion that you are covered.)

Back to yellow. When talking about the liver, yellow shows up in a surprisingly number of ways. For instance, jaundice has roots back to Old French *jaune*, meaning 'yellow.' This led to the expression yellow with envy. In the 1840's, a French physician looked at a diseased liver and coined the word cirrhosis from the Greek *kirrhos* for tawny. It is a colorful name for an awful disease.

Yellow also figures in to hepatitis C virus (HCV). (OK, I am stretching here.) HCV is a member of the *Hepacivirus* genus in the family *Flaviviridae*. *Flavus* means 'yellow' in Latin. Yellow fever is in the same family as HCV.

I am running out of shades of yellow. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to name this blog "Three Shades of Yellow." Instead, I will continue to digress, and focus on literary references to the liver. Perhaps "Fifty Shades of Liver" will show up as a bestseller. (Is liver-related literature known as liverature?)

The liver appears in Shakespeare's Macbeth. A coward is called *lily-livered*. The liver is normally a dark reddish-brown or maroon color. A bloodless liver, white as a lily, refers to a lack of courage.

My favorite literary depiction of the liver is Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda's eloquent poem *Ode to the Liver*. "Yellow is your system, through red deep sea diving, to the most dangerous depths, where man is down, and eternally hiding, silent in his own powerhouse." It is a beautiful poem, and I highly recommend reading it. There are at least two translations; here is one: Ode to the Liver.

Granted, the liver does not feature prominently in literature, so this is about all I can say about it. I hope you enjoyed this silliness. Hepatitis C is serious, but we do not need to let it stop us from laughing.

Wishing you a wonderful April Fool's Day. For those who want to continue this digression, I am devoting my April blog at *LucindaPorterRN.com* to some serious fun for the liver.

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