Call a period a period: Exploring the language and knowledge of menstruation

The natural process of menstruation is often obscured by code-words such as ‘monthlies’, medical language such as ‘endometrium’, or acronyms like ‘MHM’, all of which can perpetuate period stigma.

A new study conducted in three languages, across four continents, and with over 1600 respondents, has found that period in English, regla in Spanish and règles in French are the words for menstruation most widely used and understood. Respondents were invited to spell out acronyms and very few understood commonly-used acronyms such as MHM or MHH, suggesting these acronyms further obscure the already hidden and stigmatised topic of menstruation.

‘A growing number of organisations, donors and governments now acknowledge that while menstruation is a normal, natural process, yet dignified, healthy periods require more than access to water and products. People who menstruate may have products but they also need clear information to reduce stigma and taboo,’ said menstrual researcher Janie Hampton. ‘We need to change our language around menstruation. The term ‘menstrual hygiene’ is often used but it limits periods to cleaning, whereas ‘menstrual health’ encompasses all aspects of menstruation such as well-being, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment, and rights.’

‘To improve communications and advocacy campaigns around menstruation,’ said researcher Alethea Osborne, ‘we recommend that policymakers, donors and practitioners use every-day words such as periods in English, règles in French or regla in Spanish. Call a period a period and avoid medical and technical jargon.’

Even among university graduates, knowledge of female reproductive anatomy was low. Over 35% of respondents could not label ovaries or the vagina; and over 60% could not identify the uterus. Basic knowledge about periods creates dignity, empowerment and informed choice, though medical terminology may not be necessary for a healthy period. ‘Understanding reproductive anatomy may be less important than learning how to wash your hands and use a menstrual cup safely,’ commented Janie Hampton. ‘We now need research to consider how much technical detail and anatomy is necessary in health education for safe, dignified periods.’

‘This evidence will facilitate communication, for menstrual health advocacy, education and funding,’ said Alethea Osborne.

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For the full research of 1,633 people across four continents in English, French and Spanish, see https://bit.ly/3gx56CW Date: May 2021.