

Borges on classification

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The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote in 1942 an essay titled ‘El idioma analítico de John Wilkins’ in which he laid out the challenges of human attempts to classify the world [1]. To illustrate his argument, Borges reproduced a classification of animals purportedly found in ‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled “Celestial [Emporium]” of Benevolent Knowledge’.¹ The ‘ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies’ of classification schemes noted by Borges may have a familiar ring for the experts of the WHO World Alliance on Patient Safety, as they tackle the development of a comprehensive international classification of patient safety events [2]. To contribute to the work of the World Alliance, we at the Journal have applied the categorization of animals in ancient China to classify patient safety events. One cannot help being impressed by the remarkable homology between the two taxonomies (Table 1).

On a more serious note, Borges observed that ‘it is clear that there is no classification of the Universe not being arbitrary and full of conjectures’ [1]. It may appear odd that Borges should see conjectures in classifications, which are by definition rather explicit. This is because he considers that a full understanding of the things to be classified and of their mutual relationships is necessary for the classification to make sense—he really meant ‘conjectures about the workings of the Universe’. This too is true of patient safety. The current terminology of patient safety has been likened to the Tower of Babel [3]. The problems do not lie with the words we use but rather with the underlying concepts. To fill Linnaeus’ shoes in the field of patient safety, the World Alliance experts must first establish a coherent conceptual framework for the causes, occurrences, and consequences of patient safety events. Several candidate models exist [4–6]. Only once the conceptual framework is agreed upon can a useful classification scheme emerge.

The conceptual framework need not be perfect to be usable. As any other classification, the future classification of patient safety events will evolve as knowledge accrues. Borges, again: ‘The impossibility of penetrating the divine pattern of the universe cannot stop us from planning human patterns, even though we are conscious they are not definitive’ [1].

¹The Spanish «Emporio» was rendered by «Empire» in this translation.

Table 1 Categories of animals in an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia, according to Borges, and corresponding concepts in the field of patient safety

Animals are classified into the following categories	Patient safety events are classified into the following categories
(a) Belonging to the emperor	(a) Published in a major medical journal
(b) Embalmed	(b) Described in coroner reports
(c) Tame	(c) Preventable (according to at least one of the three randomly selected experts)
(d) Sucking pigs	(d) Nosocomial infection due to poor hand hygiene
(e) Sirens	(e) Avoided through last-minute recovery
(f) Fabulous	(f) Successfully hidden from boss, colleagues, patient, family, and media
(g) Stray dogs	(g) Patient’s escape from a dementia ward
(h) Included in the present classification	(h) Submitted to an online incident reporting system
(i) Frenzied	(i) Wrong dose of catecholamines
(j) Innumerable	(j) Unnoticed
(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush	(k) Subjected to state-of-the-art root-cause analysis
(l) Et cetera	(l) Mishap, misadventure, accident, mistake, incident, undesirable occurrence, active error, lapse, slip, sentinel event, adverse event, violation, illegal action, legal action, complaint, and complication
(m) Having just broken the water pitcher	(m) On the front page of today’s newspapers
(n) That from a long way off look like flies	(n) On the front page of last year’s newspapers

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