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## Those mysterious words, Part 3

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# Those mysterious words – what do they mean? Part 3

## Illnesses

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

The ancestors died from various causes, but as there were very few doctors or surgeons in the old days, the causes of death can be anybody's guess.

The clergymen had to write down what they thought in the death records, as they every year had to report back to the Central Bureau of Statistics, beginning in 1749 when this was founded. Some clergymen were interested enough to take a little course of a few weeks of medicine, others got by with the help of a medical dictionary.

This means that the causes of death are probably correct when somebody died from an accident, drowned in the lake, or was hit by falling rocks in the mine, or hanged himself. For internal illnesses the diagnosis is probably also true when there were epidemics of, for instance, smallpox or the measles.

With the help of a recent book, *Gamla sjukdomsnamn i gångna tider* (Names of illnesses in past times), by the pharmacist Gunnar Lagerkrans (latest printing in 2003), we will look at some of the illnesses you may see in the death records.

### Håll och styng

This is usually translated as *pneumonia*, but literally means that the sick person feels a stitch in his chest, a sharp pain when breathing or moving.

### Frossa

This is usually translated as *the ague*, shivering and feeling first hot, and then really cold. This can be the

symptoms of *malaria*, which was quite common in Sweden about 200 years ago. It was especially common along the coasts and around the big lakes, Mälaren, Hjälmaren, and Vänern, but not around Vättern, as the water is much colder in that lake.

### Okänd barnasjuka

This is one of the most common causes of death for small children, and can be translated as “unknown children's disease” or “I do not know.”

### Rödsot

This is one of the names for *dysentery*, as a visible sign of the illness was a bloody diarrhea. It comes from bad hygienic conditions, where many people lived together closely and did not have enough access to clean water and clean latrines. It is also very contagious. There was an epidemic in Sweden in 1772–74, when hundreds of people died, mostly children and old people. This can also be called “*durchlopp*,” a German word that means diarrhea.

### Nervfeber, tyfus

This is translated as *typhoid fever*, and is also caused by bad health conditions, and is very contagious. In 1788–89 soldiers marched to Karlskrona and waited to be transported to the war in Finland. During their wait they had no tents, bad uniforms, and little food, so they died in the thousands without firing a single shot.

### Förstoppning

This is called *constipation* in English. It can be deadly, if not treated in the

right way with laxatives and more fibers, etc.

### Lungsot, tvinsot, tbc

This is the same as *tuberculosis*, or *consumption*, which was a big killer in the 1800s and the early 1900s, until it was realized how to treat it. The name *tvinsot* means “wasting illness” as the sick person lost a lot of weight. Young people in their teens or early twenties were especially vulnerable to this.

### Svullnad, vattusot

This is translated as *dropsy*, and was probably a heart condition, when the sick person had too much water in the body.

### Ålderdomssvaghet

This is translated as *old age frailty*, which probably means old people being easily tired, not able to work, and losing interest in life.

### Smittkoppor, koppor

This is *smallpox*, which was a big killer during the 1700s, until inoculation became mandatory in 1816. This is called “vaccination” in Swedish. There is a special column in the clerical surveys which shows if people had been inoculated (v) or had had natural smallpox (n).

### Mässling

This is translated as the *measles*, an acute, contagious viral disease, one certain sign is red spots on the skin, fever, and coughing. This was also an epidemic, and killed mostly small children, often all the children in a family.