Basic medical terms guide
This guide provides an overview of some basic medical terms, For a fuller description go to the Online Medical Dictionary at http://www.mydr.com.au/tools/Dictionary.asp

A

ABC: The ‘ABC’ of resuscitation or life support means to check Airways, Breathing and Circulation.

ACUTE: When applied to a medical condition, this term means ‘of severe, sudden, but short duration’. As opposed to CHRONIC.

ACUTE MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION: Onset of sudden damage to part of the heart muscle, usually due to blockage of the heart's (coronary) arteries. Synonymous with a heart attack.

ADDICTION: In the context of this handbook, the habitual taking of drugs or alcohol due to a physical and/or psychological dependency.

AFEBRILE: Without fever. As opposed to FEBRILE.

AIDS: see AUTOIMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME.

ALCOHOLISM: Where any physical, mental or social problem caused by alcohol is present.

ALLERGY: Sensitivity to a foreign substance, resulting in a physical reaction such as rash or hay fever.

AMBULANT: Able to walk.

ANAEMIA: A decrease in the concentration of red blood cells or of HAEMOGLOBIN in the blood. May cause pallor (paleness) of the skin.

ANGINA: Cardiac pain due to poor blood supply to the heart.

ANOREXIA: Loss of appetite.

ANOXIA: Without oxygen

ANTI-ANXIETY (medication): Prescribed drugs used to treat anxiety disorders.

ANTIBIOTIC: A drug that destroys bacteria.

ANTIBODY: A substance produced by the immune system to fight invading organisms such as viruses.

ANTIDEPRESSANT (medication): Prescribed drugs used to treat depression.

ANTIPSYCHOTIC (medication): Prescribed drugs used to treat psychosis.
ANXIETY: A state of tension affecting the mind and the body. Anxiety can range from acute (short term) to chronic (long term).

APERIENT: A laxative (to move the bowels)

APPENDICITIS: Inflammation of the appendix, a hollow finger-like projection of the colon.

ARREST: Used in a medical sense, this means a cessation of bodily activity (for example, cardiac arrest means that the heart has stopped beating and respiratory arrest means cessation of breathing).

ARTHRITE: Inflammation of a joint. See also INFLAMMATION

ASTHMA: A lung disease characterised by difficulty in breathing and by coughing and wheezing.

ATAXIA: A jerky unsteadiness of the limbs and body due to disease in a particular part of the brain.

AURA: A visual disturbance occurring prior to an epileptic fit.

AUTOIMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME: Commonly referred to as AIDS, it implies loss of immune system function.

B

BACTERIA: Microscopic organisms that cause infection and which can reproduce themselves.

BASELINE BLOOD TEST: Basic tests done in initial stages of a medical investigation.

BCG: The 'Bacille Calmett-Guerin' (tuberculosis or TB) vaccination. [see 'Mantoux test']

BRONCHIAL: Of the larger airways of the lungs.

BRONCHITIS: Infection of the larger airways of the lungs.

C

CAROTID: The large artery beside the larynx which is ideal for emergency checking of the pulse.

CHRONIC: Long term. As opposed to ACUTE.

CIRRHOSIS: Condition of the liver where it becomes shrunken, hardened and fails to function normally.

COGNITION: The area of more sophisticated mental functioning (intelligence, judgment, insight, memory and so on).
COMA: A persistent state of unconsciousness.

CONCUSSION: Loss of consciousness due to severe head injury.

CORONER: A magistrate appointed to investigate the cause of death in certain situations, for instance a sudden unexpected death.

CPR: Cardio-Pulmonary-Resuscitation (active combined resuscitation of the heart and lungs).

CVD: Cardio Vascular Disease

DELIRIUM TREMENS (the DTs): A serious state of delirium due to alcohol withdrawal. Due to overactivity of the nervous system.

DELUSION: A false idea or belief held by a person that cannot be corrected by reasoning.

DEMENTIA: Partial or total loss of personality and other significant mental functions, due to mental deterioration, but without psychosis.

DEPENDENCY: Describes an ongoing need for a substance to prevent unpleasant symptoms. May be psychological or physical.

DEPERSONALISATION: A subjective experience where there is a feeling of being disconnected from the body or from the immediate environment.

DEPRESSION: An unpleasant, unhappy state of mind and body with significant impairment of memory, concentration and other mental processes. Physical activity is also slowed.

DERMATITIS: Inflammation of the skin.

DETOXIFICATION: Removal over time of toxic (drugs/alcohol etc.) substances from the body.

DIABETES: A disease with abnormally high blood sugar. Due to lack of insulin.

DIABETIC: A patient with diabetes.

DIAGNOSIS: Determination of the cause and severity of a disease.

DISASSOCIATION: See DEPERSONALISATION.

DISORIENTATION: Inability to recognise time or surroundings or identify oneself or another person.

DRUG WITHDRAWAL: The process where a toxic substance (drug) is naturally removed from the body. Subjectively unpleasant.
DUPEYTRON'S CONTRACTURE: Deformity of the hand, with the fingers in a claw-like position.

DYSPNOEA: Difficulty in breathing.

E

ECG: Electrocardiogram. An electrical recording of activity of the heart. May indicate either angina or a heartbeat rhythm problem.

ECT: Electroconvulsive Therapy. Used in the treatment of severe depression.


EMPHYSEMA: A lung disease with loss of lung tissue. Occurs in cigarette smokers.

EPILEPSY: The occurrence of convulsions (involuntary bodily movements) due to abnormal electrical discharges in the brain.

EPISTAXIS: Bleeding of the nose.

F

FEBRILE: The presence of fever. As opposed to AFEBRILE.

FEVER: A temperature above the normal level of 37 degrees Celsius.

FISTULA: A site where one bodily organ has formed an abnormal opening into another.

FITS: (1) The occurrence of epilepsy. See EPILEPSY. (2) The street name (slang) for hypodermic syringes.

FRACTURE: A broken bone.

G

GALLSTONES: A common disease where firm 'stones' accumulate in the gall bladder.

GASTRITIS: Inflammation of the lining of the stomach, with pain and/or vomiting.

GASTRO-ENTERITIS: Inflammation of the stomach and intestine, with vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

GENERIC: When used in regard to health care, implies nonspecialised, or not specifically related to, a particular group, service, company etc.

H

HAEMATEMESIS: Vomiting of pure blood or blood mixed with stomach contents.
HAEMATOMA: Medical name for a well demarcated 'bruise'.

HAEMATURIA: Blood in the urine.

HAEMOGLOBIN: A complicated iron-containing protein and found in red blood cells. It carries oxygen to the tissues. See also ANAEMIA.

HAEMOPTYSIS: Coughing up of blood. May be difficult to distinguish from HAEMATEMESIS.

HAEMORRHAGE: Loss of blood from the body, either internally or externally.

HALLUCINATION: A false sensory perception of one or more of the senses (vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch).

HEART ATTACK: A general term referring to an acute affliction of the heart. Usually refers to ACUTE MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION, but may be used to describe acute onset of a disturbance to heartbeat rhythm.

HEART DISEASE: Any disease affecting the heart.

HEART FAILURE: Where the heart fails to perform its job of pumping blood to the lungs and to the remainder of the body.

HEPATITIS: Inflammation of the liver; usually due to toxic substances such as alcohol or to viral infections such as the Hepatitis C virus.

HERNIA: The abnormal protrusion of the contents of one part of the body into another.

HIV: see HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS.

HOSPICE: A small hospital for the terminally ill.

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS: A virus which infects the human immune system, impeding its operation.

HYPERGLYCAEMIA: A blood sugar level above normal, which is indicative of diabetes. Compare to HYPOGLYCAEMIA.

HYPERTENSION: Blood pressure above normal; sometimes inaccurately used to describe stress.

HYPERVENTILATION: Breathing at a rate above normal, and often due to anxiety.

HYPOGLYCAEMIA: A low blood sugar level. Usually due to an excessive insulin dose. Compare to HYPERGLYCAEMIA.

HYPOTENSION: Low blood pressure.

HYPOTHERMIA: A low body temperature, which may be life threatening.
I

INCONTINENCE: Loss of control of the bladder and/or bowel.

INFECTION: Invasion of the body by harmful organisms that cause disease.

INFLAMMATION: The body’s reaction to injury. Signs of inflammation are redness, heat, swelling and tenderness. See also ARTHRITIS.

INSOMNIA: Inability to sleep.

INSULIN: A substance produced by the pancreas; needed to convert sugar to energy. Lacking in diabetics.

INTRAVENOUS: Within the vein, as with injections into a vein.

ISCHAEMIA: Lack of blood supply to an area of the body. For example, cardiac ischaemia, which may cause angina. If severe, cardiac ischaemia may cause a heart attack.

J

JAUNDICE: Yellow discolouration of the skin and eyes due to liver disease.

K

KORSAKOFF’S SYNDROME: Sufferers show amnesia and confabulation (filling in gaps in memory by guessing); due to the end stage of alcoholism. Connected with the Alcohol Related Brain Injury Syndrome.

L

LUNG CLOT: see PULMONARY EMBOLUS.

M

MANIA: An elated, overactive state of mind and body, with restlessness and euphoria.

MANIPULATION (medical): Manual movement of a body part to more acceptable position.

MANTOUX TEST: A skin test given to assist in the diagnosis of tuberculosis.

MENINGITIS: Inflammation of the meninges, a collection of three protective membranes surrounding the brain.

MIGRAINE: A headache with specific characteristics and due to disturbances to the blood vessels in the head.

MORBIDITY: (1) Description of the outcomes of disease. (2) The relative incidence of a particular disease in a specific locality.
MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROME: An aberrant condition involving fabrication of an illness to attract medical attention. Sufferers seek numerous medical consultations with different doctors.

N

NAUSEA: An unpleasant sick feeling in the stomach area.

NEBULISER: A device powered by an air pump which converts a liquid to a fine spray for inhalation. Often used by asthma sufferers.

NEURITIS: Inflammation of neural tissue.

NEUROSIs: A mental condition with many variations, but most commonly with anxiety due to various causes such as stress or previous difficult life experiences. The personality is usually not severely affected.

NIGHT SWEATS: Excessive night-time sweating May indicate serious disease, for example TB.

O

OEDEMA: Fluid in the tissues.

OESOPHAGUS: The part of the digestive tract between mouth and stomach. Synonymous with the gullet.

ORIENTATION: The ability of a person to reliably establish their position regarding time, place and persons.

OVERDOSE: Administration of an excessive amount of a drug or substance into the body.

P

PALLIATIVE CARE: Care aimed at minimising pain and suffering without aiming to effect a cure.

PALPITATIONS: Awareness of the heartbeat; not necessarily due to heart disease.

PANCREAS: A gland that lies behind the stomach. It produces insulin.

PANCREATITIS: Inflammation of the pancreas organ.

PARALYSIS: Loss of movement of any part of the body due to nerve damage.

PARANOIA: A form of schizophrenia involving delusions, hallucinations, fear of persecution, and undue suspicion of others.

PATHOLOGICAL: Related to an abnormality or disease.
PEDICULOSIS: Infestation of the skin by the pediculosis louse. Also known as scabies.

PEPTIC: Related to stomach acid, as in 'peptic ulcer'. See also STOMACH ULCER.

PELVIC INFLAMMATORY DISEASE: An infection of all or part of the female reproductive tract.

PERSONALITY DISORDER: A behavioural disorder that is not due to anxiety, mood disturbance or psychosis.

PHLEBITIS: Inflammation of a vein.

PHOBIA: An irrational fear of a situation, person or object.

PNEUMONIA: Infection of the lung tissue.

PNEUMOTHORAX: Condition with increase in air pressure in the chest cavity resulting in collapse of the lung.

PROGNOSIS: The likely final medical outcome of an illness, in terms of time and condition.

PSYCHOSIS: An extreme derangement of the mind, due to mental illness, with total loss of judgment, memory and insight. It may be a temporary, intermittent or permanent condition.

PSYCHOSOMATIC: Bodily symptoms associated with a nervous complaint or psychological disorder.

PSYCHOTHERAPY: Counselling treatment for mental illness.

PULMONARY: Of the lungs or bronchial system.

PULMONARY EMBOLUS: Lodgment of an embolus (mobile blood clot) in the lung tissue.

PULSE: The rhythmic expansion of an artery which can be felt.

PUNCTURED LUNG: See PNEUMOTHORAX.

R

RAPPORT: The situation whereby a facilitative and empathic understanding develops between the health care worker and his/her client/patient.

RESUSCITATION (cardiac): See CPR.
SCABIES: An inflammatory skin condition due to the pediculosis louse. See PEDICULOSIS.

SCHIZOPHRENIA: A nervous disorder characterised by disturbances to normal thought processes.

SEPSIS: Infection.

SHOCK: (1) A state of dangerously low blood pressure. (2) A state of mental distress.

SIGN (of illness): An observable indication of illness.

SINUS: (1) Facial sinus: A cavity in the skull bones. (2) An abnormal opening in a body organ, e.g. skin sinus (an opening in the skin that is discharging).

SPLEEN: A richly perfused organ in the upper left abdominal area which is unfortunately prone to trauma. It is part of the immune system.

SPUTUM: Phlegm (secretions coughed up from the lungs).

STERNUM: The middle chest bone where ribs from each side of the body meet.

STEROID: A group of chemical substances produced by the adrenal glands. May have anabolic (body building), or anti-inflammatory, or other properties.

STOMACH ULCER: An ulcer within the lining of the stomach. Synonymous with peptic ulcer. See also PEPTIC and ULCER.

STROKE: The result of damage to part of the brain; usually associated with weakness, numbness or paralysis.

SYMPTOM: A specific feeling or physical manifestation due to an illness.

SYNDROME: A group of symptoms due to a particular disease.

TB: see TUBERCULOSIS.

TETANUS: A serious bacterial infection beginning in unclean wounds, and at risk of causing paralysis.

THIAMINE: Vitamin B1. An important vitamin needed for the heart and brain; often low in alcoholics.

TOLERANCE: A process where the body adapts to administration of a foreign substance, resulting in the need for more of the drug to achieve the same effect.
TRANSFERENCE: The unconscious tendency to transfer to another person significant feelings and attitudes that are your own and which are excessive.

TUBERCULOSIS: A serious bacterial infection of the lungs or (sometimes) of the kidneys. Also referred to as 'TB'.

U

ULCER: Loss of the surface tissue layer of an organ (e.g. skin, stomach lining, cornea) is known as *ulceration*. See also STOMACH ULCER.

URGENCY (of symptoms): Sudden involuntary urges to pass urine, etc.

UROLOGICAL: Of the bladder, kidneys or urinary system.

V

VIRUS: An infective particle much smaller than a bacteria. Requires 'host' cells (for example human cells) to reproduce. Not destroyed by antibiotics.

W

WHEEZE: Breathing characterised by a whistling noise. Usually due to asthma.

WITHDRAWAL: See DRUG WITHDRAWAL.