

“Provider” Etymology is Unclear, but Still Wrong for Health Care

I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify and correct my recent commentary.¹ I wrote that the word provider was first used to refer to health care professionals during the 1930s in Nazi Germany, when Jewish physicians were termed *Behandler*. The cited manuscript stated that *Behandler* was “freely translated” as “provider.”² However, after reading social media comments that claimed this was a mistranslation, I sought to verify the translation.

Online German-English dictionaries yielded perplexing results. The dictionary Reverso translates *Behandler* as “dentist,” “practitioner,” or “therapist.”³ The Past Tenses Dictionary translates *Behandler* as “handlers.”⁴ Although a distasteful way to refer to a clinician-patient relationship, it still doesn’t translate as “provider.” The Collins and Cambridge dictionaries do not include *Behandler*, and the *Langenscheidt* dictionary does not provide a translation, instead noting that the translation “is missing” and that they are “verifying the word in question.”⁵⁻⁷ Conversely, *Anbieter* appears to be the commonly provided German translation for provider.

The author of the original manuscript acknowledged that although *Behandler* is not listed as a translation for provider, it “comes close.”² He added that *Behandler* is not used anymore in German medicine because of the Nazi past (Saenger P, personal communication, February 9, 2022). A native German and Professor of German Studies at the University of Kentucky shared that “My best guess is that the term *Behandler* was used as a short form of *Krankenbehandler*, the designation for Jewish doctors in Nazi Germany who were still allowed to treat Jewish patients after withdrawal of their medical license. The best translations would be (health) practitioner or health care provider.” (Hobusch H, personal communication, 2022). However, *Krankenbehandler* has also been translated as “practitioner of the sick.”⁸

Given this ambiguity, it is ultimately unclear whether or to what extent *Behandler* can be translated as provider. Despite this uncertainty, my original argument remains unchanged. It is best to refer to all health care professionals (eg, psychotherapists, physicians, nurses, phlebotomists, pharmacists, physician assistants, social workers, physical therapists, dentists, optometrists) by their credentials. Overarching terms such as clinicians, practitioners, or health care professionals also are reasonable. This ensures accurate terminology, respects individuals’ unique training and degrees, and avoids confusion within multidisciplinary health care settings.

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Jonathan R. Scarff, MD

Lexington Veterans Affairs Health Care System,
Kentucky

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Correction: Scarff JR. What’s in a name? The problematic term “provider”. *Fed Pract*. 2021;38(10):446-448. The translation of the German word *Behandler* is unclear; therefore, the word “provider” should not be directly associated with the Nazi regime and its treatment of Jewish physicians.