from Chicago described FDA approval for new drugs as the biggest challenge facing medical researchers.

- Although many participants were able to name a variety of benefits that the public has gained from medical research, such as increased life expectancy and an improved quality of life, some felt the pace of progress — particularly for cancer research — was not rapid enough.

"I feel we've been searching long and hard, and we really haven’t progressed that much for the time we've invested. It scares me," noted one San Diego participant whose family has been touched by cancer.

- Many focus group participants had heard of NCI and the National Institutes of Health, but a majority could not describe either organization.

Background Information

The focus groups were conducted in Baltimore, Chicago, Richmond, Va., and San Diego. In each city, three groups were convened representing persons in the community who participated in community and civic activities in the past year, people expressing a high degree of interest in information about new medical discoveries but who had limited knowledge of these issues, and people touched by cancer (those diagnosed with cancer in the past 5 years, their family members, or voluntary care givers).

Similarly, participants in the follow-up telephone interview were classified into broad groups, and a fourth category was added of people who are well informed and interested in health issues and already supportive of medical and cancer research. In addition, in both the focus groups and the phone survey, an attempt was made to achieve a balance among participants of different genders, ethnic groups, ages, and educational backgrounds.

Of the focus group participants, 53% were female and 47% were male. White non-Hispanics accounted for 64% of participants while 25% were African-American, 10% were Hispanic, and one participant was Asian-American. All focus group members were high school graduates, and nearly half were college graduates. Participation was almost equally divided across three age groups: 25 to 29, 40 to 45, and 55 to 75.

In comparison, survey participants — 90% of whom had a high school education — were evenly distributed between five age groups: 18 to 24, 25 to 39, 40 to 54, 55 to 70, and 70 and over. Of those interviewed, 51% were male and 49% were female, while approximately 61% were white, 14% were African-American, 11% were Hispanic, 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 2% were American Indian or Alaskan Native Americans, and 2% represented other racial groups.

—Susan Jenks

You Say Tomato and I Say Tomahto: Getting a Handle on Pronouncing Apoptosis

Ay-POP-toe-sis.
AP-a-toe-sis.
Ay-paw-TOE-sis.
A-parararara.

It’s that tongue-twisting word for programmed cell death that few seem to know how to pronounce, and that many have mangled in their quest to sound erudite.

Medical dictionaries add to the confusion: Dorland’s gives ap’-op-to’-sis, while Stedman’s gives ap-o-to’-sis as preferred pronunciation.

So, how should the word be pronounced? Apoptosis was introduced into the scientific literature in 1972 in a paper published in the British Journal of Cancer by researchers J. F. R. Kerr, A. H. Wyllie, and A. R. Currie, then at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. The paper was entitled, “Apoptosis: A Basic Biological Phenomenon with Wide-Ranging Implications in Tissue Kinetics.”

According to the authors, the word “apoptosis” was suggested to them by the late Professor James Cormack of the university’s Department of Greek. Kerr and coauthors wrote that apoptosis “is used in Greek to describe the ‘dropping off’ or ‘falling off’ of petals from flowers, or leaves from trees.”

Then they tackled the issue of pronunciation. “To show the derivation clearly, we propose that the stress should be on the penultimate syllable, the second half of the word pronounced like ‘plosion’ (with the ‘p’ silent) . . .”

There you have it. Out with Ay-POP-tosis; in with Ay-paw-TOE-sis.

As a final footnote, apoptosis did face some stiff competition. In an article in the International Review of Cytology in 1980, Wyllie, Kerr, and Currie offered some of the runner-up terms for apoptosis and apoptotic cells. They include ziosis, popcorn-type cytosis, extrusion subdivision, and Councilman bodies.

—Bob Kuska