

# Medicine and wagering: same terms, different concepts

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Medicine and wagering are apparently distant contexts. However, they share a number of basic terms and expressions (1). In effect, shaping estimates and making forecasts are fundamental tasks common both to medicine and betting. The examples that follow, while documenting some of this overlapping, also indicate the operative differences in the application of the same concepts in the two fields.

In clinical medicine “risk” is the term identifying the probability of occurrence of an unfavourable health event. Since every clinical intervention includes a risk, an acceptable risk is that esteemed inferior to the benefit derived from the same specific medical procedure. In the betting office the risk in laying a stake is tied to the greater or lesser probability of guessing the winning outcome (2).

Still in the field of risk, the term “hazard” entails many meanings. In the clinical epidemiological one hazard indicates a biological peril, and in the health statistical environment it refers to an instantaneous risk. With regard to game of chance, the term hazard is synonymous of chance and further identifies a game with dices (1, 2).

“Odds” are closely linked to risks and probabilities. The odds of a result are the ratio between the probability that the result will occur and the probability that it will not occur (1). In clinical medicine the odds of the occurrence of an adverse event following the administration of a drug represent the practical health application of this statistical concept. In the betting context the odds of the totalizator at the race-track specifically indicate the probabilities, attributed to different horses, of winning the same race.

In conclusion, a series of terms are used both in medicine and wagering, and the analogous statistical roots and the common necessity of computing risks and formulating predictions explain the presence of the same terms, indicating the permeability of the medical context to the insertion of terminology taken from other fields (3). Obviously, the meaning and application of words change in the two contexts, as the history of medicine well documents.

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