

How to avoid getting 'hit by air' in Italy

🕒 3 December 2011



| Keeping the neck warm is an important part of staying well for Italians

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Many Italians, it seems, are prone to a particularly wide range of winter illnesses, helped apparently by an in-depth knowledge of human anatomy.

More than a decade living in this country has led me to a shocking conclusion. Being Italian is bad for your health.

As winter draws in, those around me are suffering from a range of distinctly Italian ailments, that make our limited British colds and flus sound as bland as our food.

As I cycle around the medieval streets of my adoptive home town of Bologna, I smile to myself, marvelling at the fact that I am still wearing a light-weight jacket at this time of year.

No translation

My Italian counterparts are less fortunate.

They have their woolly scarves and quilted coats out and are rubbing their necks, complaining of my favourite mystery Italian malady "la cervicale".

"Soffro di cervicale (I suffer from cervicale)," they tell me, making it sound particularly serious.

Most people over the age of 30 seem to have the condition, but I am still at a loss as to what exactly it is and how to translate it.

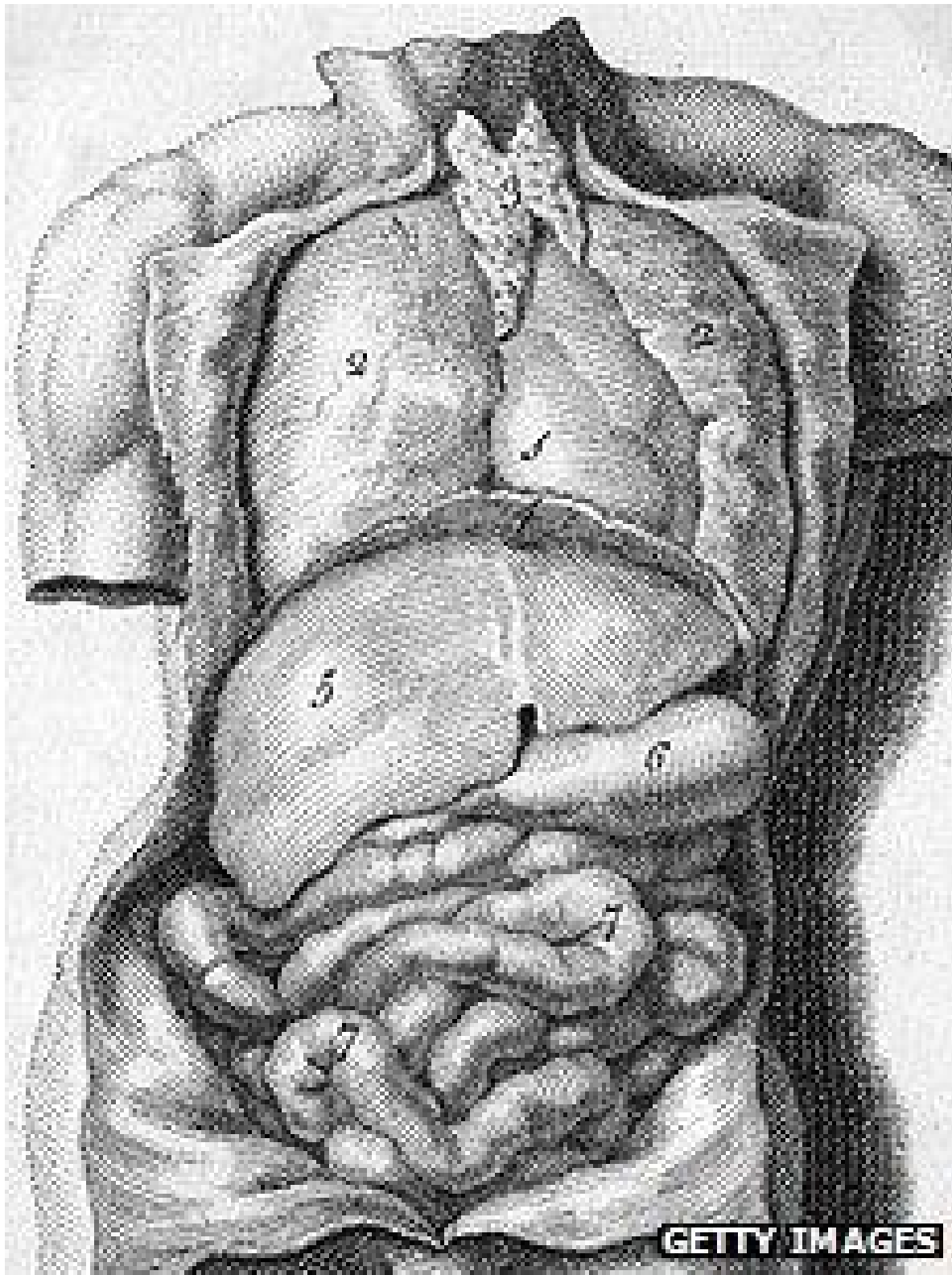
I have looked it up in the dictionary and found "cervical" - an adjective referring to the cervical vertebrae, those little bones in the back of your neck - but as an ailment, there is simply no English translation. We do not have it!

The British also do not seem to have the sort of exceptional knowledge of their own anatomy which Italians have.

Benefits of ignorance

Soon after I moved here, I remember a friend telling me he was not feeling very well. "My liver hurts," he said.

I have since been assured by doctors that you cannot actually feel your liver, but what really struck me was the fact that he knew where his liver was.



| Could knowledge of anatomy be bad for your health?

We British, in contrast, are a nation staggeringly ignorant of our anatomy.

Italians can also tell you if the pain is in their stomach or intestine - and can even specify whether it is colic or colitis - but to us it is all just "tummy ache".

Yet although I should feel embarrassed about my inability to point out the exact location of my gall bladder, I am not.

Why? Because I think it makes me healthier.

After years of first-hand experience of the delicate Italian constitution, I have come up with a theory about why we British are so much sturdier. If you cannot name it, you cannot suffer from it. If you do not know where it is, it cannot hurt you.

Among my Italian friends I am considered something of an immuno-superhuman.

I can leave the gym sweaty to have my shower at home and not catch a chill en route. I can swim after eating and not get congestion or cramp. I can walk around with wet hair and not get "la cervicale".

I even brag about it. At restaurants I will say: "Let me sit in the draught. I'll be fine. I'm English."

'Mustn't grumble'

I ran my theory past a Sicilian psychoanalyst and he said I had a point.

For example, the British do not have a term for a "colpo d'aria". It literally translates as a "hit of air" and seems to be incredibly dangerous for Italians.

They can get one in their eye, their ear, their head or any part of their abdomen.

To avoid getting a colpo d'aria, until at least April, they must never go out without wearing a woollen vest, known as a "maglia della salute" (a shirt of health).

British mums hold their kids' jackets so they will not get hot and sweaty while they run around and play. In contrast, the parks here in Italy are filled with pint-sized, quilted Michelin men, zipped up to their noses to stop the air getting in and hitting them.

Italians are brought up to be afraid of these health risks, while our ignorance of their very existence makes us strong and fearless.

It is a question of etiquette too.

We are a nation that "mustn't grumble", trained from an early age that the only answer to "How are you?" is "Fine, thank you."

Our vocabulary reflects this. Whether we have had a cold or spent six weeks in intensive care, we will tell you we have been "a bit poorly".

'Change of season'

But last week I experienced a moment of panic. I woke up feeling weak and nauseous.

What if that cultural difference was actually contagious?

What if years in the country had changed my constitution and I too was suffering from another common Italian health hazard, "the change of season"?

I tried to convince myself that lack of sleep was to blame, but I was not certain.

Later that day, I bumped into a neighbour and confessed that I was feeling "a bit poorly".

"Ooh," she said, looking concerned. "I went to the doctor yesterday and he told me there's a 48-hour stomach flu going around."

Then her face brightened up. "But don't worry, you're English so it'll only last 24 hours for you!"

And suddenly - superhuman status restored - I felt a whole lot better.

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