The SPARK That Burns Me Up
To the Editor:

In the recent editorial by Lenfant, the acronym SPARK popped up repeatedly without ever being defined. I even went to the trouble of looking it up from http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/funding/fromdir/sparkweb.htm for a copy of the SPARK report as the author suggested, but could not find a definition of the acronym SPARK in that report either.

Man is the animal that likes to abbreviate, eg, AIDS, AOL, AT & T, BBC, BMW, CBS, CEO, FEDEX, GE, HIV, IBM, MI, NASDAQ, NATO, PC, PDR, TV, UK, UPS, WHO, etc. Of course, the federal government of the United States is known for its creativity in coining abbreviations and acronyms, eg, AWOL, CIA, DOD, EPS, FANNIE MAE, FBI, FDA, FDR, FEMA, GI, GOP, IRS, NIH, SEC, VA, WAC, ZIP, etc. Thus, I was not too surprised that the author, being from the NIH (oh, I should have said from the National Institutes of Health), which is a part of the federal government, did not bother to define the acronym SPARK in his article. What puzzled me most, however, was the fact that he took time to define NIH and NHLBI, but not SPARK, in his editorial.

I realize that acronyms are useful to facilitate modern communication and are here to stay, especially for clinical trials in cardiology. However, as was required by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the full term for which an abbreviation or acronym stands should precede its first use in the article. Specialists, especially cardiologists, often took for granted that certain “trade terms” were self-explanatory and therefore did not bother to define them. All readers of specialty journals are not equally knowledgeable in all the acronyms, however; ignorance begets frustration and frustration leads to aggravation.

Tsung O. Cheng, MD
Professor of Medicine
George Washington University
Medical Center
2150 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20037


Response

SPARK is not an acronym. The Working Group was so named in the expectation that it would spark (stimulate) bold new thinking. We hoped to get people fired up — and apparently we succeeded!

Claude Lenfant, MD
Director
National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
Bethesda, Md

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Circulation. 2003;107:e28
doi: 10.1161/01.CIR.0000050553.09920.CE
Circulation is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0009-7322. Online ISSN: 1524-4539

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/107/3/e28

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