Opinion Piece:
Pimping: A word whose time has gone.
Dr. Catherine Lucey

I read with dismay the revised article “the Art of Pimping” by Allan Detsky in the April 1, 2009 JAMA. \[^1\] \[^2\] [http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/301/13/1379] In a light hearted vein, the authors suggest that learners should become resigned to poor questioning techniques. In doing so, they risk sustaining the use of a word that is associated with degradation and exploitation for another generation of physicians in training. It is time for both the ineffective pedagogy known by this term to cease and for the term to be banned from academic medical centers.

The “P” word may indeed have its roots in the german language (pumpfrage). I suspect, however, that most students and residents associate the word with the underworld of prostitution. Questions earning this label often result in embarrassment or humiliation of the individuals involved. While some students feel that any questioning of their knowledge that is carried out in public (e.g. on rounds or in the OR) is off limits, what should really be off limits are ineffective questions.

The Socratic method has been damned as synonymous with pimping but in fact, Socrates’ was a sophisticated questioner. His approach to teaching, using a sequence of progressively probing questions to attempt to uncover the truth evolved in contrast to the teaching philosophy of the Sophists, who believed that truth was the right of the strong. They taught by directive and their students were expected to memorize without question or challenge, their ideas. In contrast, Socrates believed that truth could be found only through exploration of a topic in a series of questions. The questions he posed had no right or known answers. His intent was to explore the topic with his students and to encourage them to work with the information they had to generate new knowledge. Today’s students concerned about abuse and mistreatment through questioning are not against the Socratic method but are against poor questioning.

In 1979 Samuel Shem published [The House of God]. A number of the terms described in his book found their way into common use by interns and residents. As a profession, we quickly realized that dehumanizing words like GOMER should never be used in the medical environment, even in jest. It is now time for us to banish another terrible term from our educational lexicon. Let all pimping cease.