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# Oxford Word of the Month – August: green whistle

*noun*: a disposable handheld inhaler for short-term pain relief following accident or injury.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Since the 1970s, many Australian accident and trauma victims have used the green whistle, an emergency analgesic device commonly carried by paramedics to give temporary pain relief to patients on their way to hospital:

*Remember when your mum told you not to ride on the handle bars of your friends pushy, and you did it anyway and subsequently fell and broke your leg (sorry Mum!)? And remember when those extremely kind ambos gave you a green whistle to help take the pain away?* ([CSIROscope](#), 21 March 2017)

Patients inhale the analgesic from a small green tube that looks like a long whistle. The inhalant is Pentrox (a marketing name for methoxyflurane), a drug developed by a Melbourne company in conjunction with CSIRO. It is non-addictive, non-narcotic and fast-acting, and used by the patient as needed. 'One green whistle should tide you over for 20 to 25 minutes being used continuously (intermittent inhaling will extend its use).' ([Techly](#), 15 May 2015)

Sports fans may have seen it given to injured players stretchered off the field. Its effectiveness is perhaps reflected in this comment: 'The green whistle has become so popular it even has its own hashtag on social media'. ([Stockhead](#), 13 February 2018)

Melbourne Cup-winning jockey Michelle Payne may be one of the few who, in times of great pain, found it wanting:

*I then had to wait forty minutes in the racecourse's casualty room before an ambulance came to get me, and all I had was the green whistle, a hand-held device allowing me to inhale an emergency analgesic. I told them it was having no effect. ... They suggested I suck on it again, I did, but nothing. I threw it at the wall.* (M. Payne, *Life As I Know It*, 2016)

An Australian invention, the device has been used in Australia and New Zealand for four decades by organisations such as ambulance services, the military, surf

lifesaving clubs and sports clubs. Despite its long history, the earliest written evidence of the term **green whistle** does not appear until the early 2000s.

Use of the inhaler has recently spread beyond Australia and New Zealand. In 2016 it was approved for sale in Europe and the UK, and is now beginning to be sold in the US. We don't know yet if the Australian common name will translate to the northern hemisphere, but this UK news item suggests the possibility:

*Penthrox, also known as **The Green Whistle**, has been trialled by [Surrey's] South East Coast Ambulance Service and they say they've been able to help badly injured patients in serious accidents much quicker and control their pain on their way to hospital. (ITV, 2 February 2016)*

**Green whistle** will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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