# WORD OF THE MONTH
## DEC 2012

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# fossil farming (also **fossil pharming**)

– *noun:* the activity of buying prescription drugs from elderly people for personal use or to sell illegally.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

A recent article in the Albury-Wodonga *Border Mail* (19 October 2012) revealed a disturbing increase in the abuse of the drug fentanyl and the subsequent deaths of at least nine people in the Albury-Wodonga region. The article highlighted the novel way this drug was being procured:

> It's become Albury-Wodonga's deadliest and most desired drug. But you won't find it being made in grubby warehouses or traded in shadowy alleyways. Instead, it's handed over by pharmacists to pensioners for just a few dollars, and traded in a lucrative black market by those at home behind closed doors.

The article went on to describe the term for this practice:

> One local drug worker told a recent Wodonga drug forum that gangs were recruiting elderly people to get prescriptions from their GPs for use in the local drug market, calling it '**fossil farming**'.

**Fossil farming** is specifically associated with the prescription-only analgesics fentanyl and oxycodone (often sold under the brand name OxyContin). Both drugs are scheduled under the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and as a result are relatively cheap and easy to obtain compared to illegal drugs like heroin. **Fossil farming** is perhaps the latest of the scams used to illegally acquire prescription drugs (such as 'doctor-shopping' – the practice of visiting more than one doctor to get the same medication).

The term **fossil farming** combines the word *fossil* in the sense of 'an older person' (recorded from the mid-19th century) with *farming* in the sense of 'exploiting or using a resource'. The specific use of this term in relation to using elderly people to procure prescription drugs is first found in Australian sources in 2009. However, an earlier but different Australian sense of **fossil farming** appeared briefly during the 1980s:

> Young muggers have been snatching bags from elderly ladies in the inner-western suburbs of Dulwich Hill, Petersham, Ashfield, Burwood and Strathfield recently. They are said to call their work '**fossil farming**'. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1987)

There is very little evidence for this usage of **fossil farming**, but it is possible that the drug-related sense has developed from it.

Some evidence exists for the variant spelling **fossil pharming**. The word *pharming*, a pun on 'farm' with allusion to 'pharmaceutical', is recorded from 1991, and refers to the genetic modification of plants or animals for pharmaceutical purposes. *Pharming* has acquired other meanings in the last decade: it has been used of teens stealing prescription drugs from the family medicine cabinet for recreational use, and can refer

*continued ...*

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also to an online scam using fake websites to trick users into revealing personal information. Although the derivation of this Internet sense may be unrelated to the word *pharmaceutical* (perhaps influenced instead by other similar e-scams such as *phishing*, a play on the word 'fishing') the word *pharming* has been known for at least twenty years, and it is therefore not surprising that **fossil farming** has picked up an alternative 'ph' spelling.

Evidence suggests that **fossil farming** is Australian. It is being considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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