Four Types of Diagnoses:

Wulff (1976) described four types of diagnoses:

*Symptom or Pseudoanatomical Diagnoses* – Examples include fever, headache, or chronic diarrhea. These symptoms offer nothing to the clinician in terms of communicating information regarding treatment and prognosis.

*Syndromes* – Aggregated clusters of symptoms that probabilistically coexist. These are empirically derived diagnoses whose utility is ultimately defined by their predictive validity, especially in terms of practical therapeutic utility. Given the absence of a test to ensure the accuracy of syndromic psychiatric conditions, clinicians must recognize that these conditions may reflect more than one etiology or pathogenic mechanism. DSM-IV is full of syndromes that have not been validated. Even though the use of explicit categorical criteria to define a case may enhance reliability, it is impossible to determine at this time whether such an approach in fact enhances or limits diagnostic validity. One might seek to “test” all DSM diagnoses by their predictive validity – their ability to predict responses to therapeutic interventions and prospectively frame the probabilities of longer-term clinical outcomes.

*Anatomical Diagnoses* – These diagnoses became the norm for much of general medicine in the past. Such methods have been shown to have limited utility in psychiatry. Moreover, organ- or tissue-related diagnoses can have multiple etiologies (such as cirrhosis, cardiomyopathy, Alzheimer’s disease), a situation that can be likened to the nonspecificity of syndromes. Demonstrating that a condition is organic has little utility clinically unless there is a definable cause that can be treated; most often, clinicians are relegated to using treatments that were developed empirically for phenomenologically similar idiopathic psychiatric conditions. Ultimately, one must discern how brain function, psychological processes, and environmental influences interact to affect the expression of distress, disease, health, and illness.

*Etiological Diagnoses* – Based on causes, not manifestations. Etiologically specific conditions cut across syndrome boundaries and often organ system boundaries. For example, infectious and inflammatory-immune diseases and diabetes present with a wide variety of symptoms, signs, or abnormal laboratory test results.