

## Pill names land us in la la land

In the last years of his life, my father reckoned he was on 22 different pills. The remarkable thing was he could reel off all their names, the scientific/marketing names of them that drug companies must spend, oh, minutes thinking up.

A friend of ours is the opposite. He takes three, and says he can't recall the names of any: there's one for blood pressure, one for cholesterol and another for depression.

He describes the first as pink and contained in a little plastic bottle coloured dark orange with a white screw cap; the second is white and comes in a fatter, dark orange plastic bottle with a white cap; the third comes in a blister pack in a cardboard packet.

They have labels with the technical name of each drug written in tiny, faint type that's too hard to read if you're old enough to need the pills. More legible type gives advice about things like not getting too much sun, and avoiding grapefruit. The name of the chemist is prominent, in fact the only thing that's easy to read.

I agree with him that there's something unhelpful about the way drug companies label their products. The anti-cholesterol pill isn't too bad. It's called Atorvastatin, and since we recognise "statin" as having something to do with cholesterol, that at least makes sense. Who knows where Atorva comes from.

The label, which is relatively legible, has the decency to tell him to take one daily at night (we'll ignore the hint of grammatical confusion therein) for the control of cholesterol. Careful wording that – it controls; no suggestion of that dangerous word "cure", which is to be avoided at all cost for obvious reasons.

The other two pills are where the real problem lies - one is called Cilazapril and the other Citalopram. I reckon even Dad, with his great recall, would have struggled with that. My friend has tried to think of word associations and rhymes to embed them in his mind, but the best he can do is say the BP tabs are the pink ones.

Those are the Cilazaprils, which by the way has a plus sign following it in its tiny, faded typeface and the words "hydrochlorothiazide Ta". And some numbers – 5mg+ 12.5mg (APO). Fair enough. That info is for the medical people and the pharmacist. We don't need to know.

Until something goes wrong. It did the other day. The computer system at my friend's GP's surgery crashed. My friend had run out of pills and was hoping for an urgent renewal that couldn't for the moment be easily provided.

The practice staff asked him to confirm what he was on, but he couldn't read the bottle label because his eyesight's bugged even with glasses. He can't remember the difference between Cilaza and Citalo, so as a last resort he said helplessly: "The blood pressure pills are the pink ones." The response was understandably icy: "We don't go by colour."

So he's feeling a bit discombobulated. While he has no problem recalling the details of a long report or the proceedings of a council meeting without resorting to notes, he's faced with the prospect of trying to do something he's never been good at – remembering names.

The fact drug companies are free to muddy the water by calling two entirely different medications by similar names does not help.

He says he would be happy to assist if they ever wanted to show concern for the vast public hordes relying on their pills. If it's inspiration they want, he would oblige for free. He reckons he's as good at making up new words as the smartest 11-year-old American child, whom we suspect is doing the work now.

For the blood pressure pills, how about "BPpinks"; for anti-depressants, let's go with the tried-and-true "happypills"; and for the cholesterol ones, "arteryreamers". I know – not long enough and too easy to understand.

One other thing. The cholesterol pill bottle at least reminds him what its contents do, but while the label on the BP bottle says take one daily in the morning, it fails to say what for.

The happy pill blister pack doesn't even say that much. The packet warns to keep it away from kids, that the pills might make you sleepy, that you need to limit your alcohol intake (to what, I wonder), and to take one each morning – but no hint about what they do..

Citalopram, Cilazapril...what could possibly go wrong.