Doctor, can I take you back a quarter of a century? You may find this hard to believe, but until far into the 1980s, the vast majority of NHS prescriptions were written by hand!

Yes, when prescribing anything, the average GP just took out his trusty fountain pen or ballpoint and began to scribble away. We were nearly all in a hurry, so sometimes the ‘scribble’ wasn’t all that legible. Indeed, radio comedians could always raise a laugh about ‘doctors’ handwriting’ – because it was generally reckoned to be so illegible.

The pharmacist at my medical school advised us students to “obtain a typewriter”. And there were actually a few GPs who followed this advice, and typed all their scripts. You can imagine what it was like, trying to feed those little green slips of paper around the roller of a Smith Corona!

Writing things out by hand was all very time consuming. To try to speed things up, at a lot of surgeries, the receptionists used to fill in each person’s name and address at the top of an FP10 as soon as they arrived – before they entered the consulting room. So your patient would come in to see you, already carrying a blank prescription form with his or her name on it!

A gravid mistake

Naturally, the ‘handwritten’ system was not only slow, but sometimes inaccurate. Pharmacists became very good at deciphering their local GP’s handwriting, but even so there were mistakes.

The most notorious one I recall was a case in which a doctor tried to write a prescription for ‘Femulen’, which at the time was a well-known ‘mini-pill’ or progestogen-only pill. The patient went off to the chemist’s with the scrip in her hand. I don’t think that what the GP had written was ever really established. But the end result was that the lady returned home with half a dozen packs of Feminax – which is a mild NSAID-containing tablet, designed for the relief of period pain. The results were disastrous, particularly for the poor woman, who became pregnant within a month. Inevitably, she sued.

One of the things that tended to cause problems with handwritten prescriptions was the use of Latin. Well, not real Latin, but a sort of ‘cod-Latin’ that had been handed down by physicians for perhaps a couple of centuries. The idea was that you scribbled down little ‘codes’, which the pharmacist ‘translated’ into English on the label of the medication.

Among the most common were:
- a.c. (ante cibum) = before meals
- p.c. (post cibum) = after meals
- p.r.n. (pro re nata) = when required
- t.i.d. (ter in die) = three times daily
- stat = immediately
- nocte = to be taken at night
- mitte = send (ie dispense).

And so on. Personally, I gave up writing bits of ‘dog Latin’ when a pharmacist rang up and shocked me by saying: “What’s this ‘mitte’ stuff you’ve prescribed, doc? We don’t seem to have it in stock!”

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