**Putting prescribing to the test**

**DAVID DELVIN**

Doctors are under increasing pressure to prescribe a little something to help nervous patients through their driving test, but Dr Delvin wonders whether there really is anything safe and effective that can be offered.

"Doc, I just want something to get my son through his driving test."

I used to dread this request, which was quite common when I practised in East Anglia. An astonishing number of parents believed that if a teenager was going to take the L-test, the thing to do was to obtain a pill from the doctor, and to get the youngster to swallow it, an hour or so before meeting the examiner!

The problem, of course, was nerves. Lots of these poor kids were so anxious about driving, and so terrified of failure, that they could hardly open the car door, let alone start the engine. But their parents were convinced that I could just write a script for some drug that would calm them down on the day, so that they would pass with flying colours.

I tried explaining that there was no tranquiliser or sedative that I could safely prescribe for an anxious learner driver. I mentioned that the Transport and Road Research Laboratory had shown that these drugs could have a bad effect on driving performance by slowing up people’s reactions. The parents did not believe me. They usually said something like: “Old Dr McSporran used to prescribe the driving test pills. Why can’t you?”

I tried asking the mums and dads precisely what drug they thought I could prescribe for their offspring. Generally, they didn’t know, though some mentioned Valium or Librium, or even “that nice phenobarbitone that Granny used to take”.

A simple solution

Eventually, I discovered that there was a simple solution to this problem. A pharmacist friend of mine did quite a substantial trade in what he called ‘Driving Test Mixture’. It was an impressive-looking liquid, which he sold for about five quid a bottle. The label said (in large, dark, old-fashioned lettering):

**Take two tablespoonfuls, one hour before the test. Under no circumstances exceed the stated dose!**

One day, he let me into his secret: the ‘Driving Test Mixture’ was just sugar and water, with a little colouring and flavouring. But people swore by it and recommended it to all their friends. Talk about the power of the placebo! From then on, I referred all these cases to his pharmacy.

The myth that there is a prescription to get you through the L-test still goes on. If you Google the words “driving test nerves medication” you’ll be offered all sorts of suggestions, including the famous Rescue Remedy – which is apparently a blend of various flower essences. People are convinced that it will make you tranquil and ready to sail through the exam.

Alternatively, a few net users suggest taking something called Kalms immediately before you arrive at the Test Centre. This is another herbal concoction and I just hope it has no side-effects!

But some websites now recommend that nervous learners should simply “go to a GP and say you want a beta-blocker to take before the test”. So, doctor, don’t be surprised if next week some aspiring driver comes in and asks you for propranolol. Good luck!

Dr David Delvin is a recently-retired GP, who practised in London, Kent and East Anglia