

What's in a name?

I have developed a serious problem with drug names. Not the ones I prescribe (though they can be hard enough), but the ones my patients claim to be taking. When I first started working in the field of substance misuse, more than a decade ago, life was relatively easy. We dealt in alcohol, opioids and benzodiazepines, with occasional forays into stimulants. Street names could be a bit of a challenge, but once I established that a quick perusal of *Trainspotting* and its more up-to-date equivalents was not actually a good alternative to just asking the patient, life became much easier. Without personal experience, you're always going to sound a bit silly spouting your street slang, and any drug user worth their salt is going to see straight through you. In fact, admitting ignorance usually stimulates the sharing of much interesting and educational information over and above the easily acquired basics about smack and blues. I learnt this fairly quickly.

Now, I know my opioids pretty well, and I'm really quite comfortable with a wide range of alcoholic beverages. But recently things have become a lot more complicated, largely due to the advent of a pernicious collection of chemicals known as Novel Psychoactive Substances. The first thing to say about this description is that it's entirely useless when enquiring about a history of drug use. The alternative, legal highs, is more likely to yield useful results, but covers a multitude of sins. It is also rendered somewhat meaningless once a drug is proclaimed illegal, as happened recently to an aptly named local favourite known as Burst. Designer drugs? Bath salts? Synthetic cathinones? I've just finished reading a very interesting report about club drugs by Dr Owen Bowden-Jones, a London psychiatrist, which acknowledges some of the difficulties around nomenclature, and has the advantage of being able to include those on either side of the legal divide. Yet this term, too, is misleading, as consumption of the drugs described is certainly not confined to clubs. We are being encouraged to use the term NPS, a snappy abbreviation of Novel Psychoactive Substances, and, for the sake of clarity, I am sticking to this. But it's a distressing acronym for a pedant, as very difficult to

refer to in the plural without doing horrible things with apostrophes, which somehow just seems wrong.

It gets worse. Having somehow established the use of NPS's (grammatically correct according to my research), the next hurdle is to elucidate which of the literally countless substances available the patient thinks they've consumed. I say "thinks" because what's written on the colourful and enticing packaging isn't always what's contained within, adding to the risks involved. The names themselves are like something out of a bad sci-fi movie – you couldn't make them up. They are reminiscent of Dungeons and Dragons crossed with Breaking Bad – I can't help imagining both drugs and names being dreamt up by someone in a damp underground cavern, with bubbling test tubes (or even cauldrons) and lots of badly chalked symbols, dressed in some dodgy robes. The reality is probably that this little fantasy is exactly what they're supposed to achieve, through some very clever marketing. There is a sordid glamour about names like Annihilation, Dust Till Dawn, Exodus, Clockwork Orange, Fury and Fusion. Others have a cheery ring – Jumping Beans, Disco Biscuits and, of course, Spice. The packaging is usually gaudy, and it's hard to believe that such crass looking products could be dangerous. In fact, you could imagine school children exchanging them in the playground, and this, combined with their oddly legal (or not always illegal) status, may lull the curious into a false sense of security.

However, they should beware, as these drugs are very cleverly manipulated to mimic the effects of various well-established illegal substances, such as cocaine, amphetamines, psychedelics and cannabis. They are not regulated, and are commonly sold as bath salts or plant food, with the advice – or barefaced lie, really – that they are not meant for human consumption. And, like their illegal cousins, they can cause great damage to mental and physical health. Burst, also known as ethylphenidate, has precipitated outbreaks of aggressive and psychotic behaviour in users, and is also being injected, with the consequent risk of infection with hepatitis C or HIV, or, perhaps worse, that very nasty condition called necrotizing fasciitis (more sensationally known as flesh-

eating syndrome). Burst, and some of its equally unpleasant relations have very recently been made the subject of a temporary ban, which one would imagine would be a good thing, were it not for all the busily whirring chemistry sets almost certainly churning out slightly altered (therefore not illegal) replacements. It's all rather depressing. By the time any permanent ban is imposed, Burst and its consequences will have melted from our minds. In fact, we were warned within hours of the temporary ban to look out for use of MPA, an alternative legal high ironically known as Mind Melt.

But maybe there has always been a tawdry glamour about drug use, reflected in the names used to describe it. There's nothing novel about chasing the dragon, and there is a certain literary mystique surrounding laudanum and absinthe, that may not have been quite so obviously attractive to destitute dependent users in years gone by. Even Buckfast Tonic Wine conjures up an almost Arthurian landscape of monks and castles – and chaos. Much of life is humdrum and unexciting, and people have sought escape and excitement in mind-altering drugs for millennia. But these new drugs are too brightly coloured and too available, and there are simply too many of them. They are misleading, in that legal may seem to mean safe, and their names promise escape and fantasy, that is, at best, illusion. Many describe their use as unpredictable and often unpleasant, and for a small, but growing number, it ends in tragedy. There are no good words for this.

Rebecca Lawrence
Consultant Psychiatrist in Addictions
Edinburgh