Cryptic ’Script

April 1, 2001 By Frank Romanelli, PharmD

Owing in part to the famously illegible chicken scrawl that many physicians use to pen the ever-growing number of prescriptions, pharmaceutical foul-ups are on the rise. In 1999, drug errors accounted for 7,000 deaths and far more cases of damaged health. Sloppy ’scripts aside, many meds are mixed up because they have similar names: for example, generic names of protease inhibitors all end in *-navir* and most NNRTIs in *-ine.* Two other common generic/brand AIDS-med screwups: AZT (Retrovir) and Norvir (ritonavir); saquinavir hard gel (Invirase) and saquinavir soft gel (Fortovase). So how does an HIVer avoid becoming the next error statistic?

1. Know your meds. After your doc writes the ’script, ask to see the pill either in the flesh or in *The Physician’s Desk Reference*, which has photos of most brand-name drugs. Carefully note color, shape and markings. You can also check *The HIV Drug Book, 2nd Edition* by Project Inform (Pocket Books Reference, $18) available at a local bookstore or Amazon.com.

2. Check your prescription. Before leaving the doctor’s office, be certain you can read the ’script; if not, chances are, neither can the pharmacist. Even if it’s legible, ask the doctor to include both brand and generic names and skip abbreviations to avoid confusion.

3. Know your pharmacist. This may be a challenge in large cities, but it’s best to use one pharmacy and ideally one pharmacist for all your prescription needs. The more familiar your pharmacist is with you and your prescriptions, the less likely the mis-haps. And go out of your way to find an HIV-friendly one. That makes all the difference.

4. Investigate errors. Think you received the wrong med? Check your drug chart or call your pharmacist before popping doubtful pills. Ask questions -- it’s better to know now rather than suffer the consequences later.

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