Rub a Drug Flub

A doc’s penmanship may be mightier than the sword

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Tearing into a new prescription before double-checking the label could pose a health hazard as pharmacy flubs flare. Confusion between sound-alike drugs like Retrovir (AZT) and ritonavir (Norvir) has resulted in at least 10 serious prescription errors, according to the not-for-profit U.S. Pharmacopeia’s Medication Errors Reporting (MER) program. One poor PWA landed in intensive care when his prescription for the anti-protease saquinavir (Invirase) was filled with the antidepressant Sinequan. Other misfires have involved the antiviral lamivudine (3TC) and the anticonvulsant lamotrigine (for epilepsy). U.S. Pharmacopeia suggested that docs order drugs by both brand and generic name, and avoid abbreviations. PWAs and pharmacists should store similarly named pills in separate areas. Pharmacist Constantine Torlidakis said, “It’s usually the doctor’s handwriting. But manufacturers should take more time to choose brand names.”

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