

## TAKE A PILL, ANY PILL

I HAD A FRIEND in high school who called himself The Mutated Lizard. His hobby was taking drugs, any and all kinds, no questions asked. He wolfed down pills the way a starving dog eats kibbles. Put any capsule under his nose and he would swallow it, only asking later what it was. I witnessed him at numerous parties, walking around collecting fistfuls of random brightly-coloured tablets and blotter papers, bags of white powders and rolled leaves, and bottles of anything from cough syrup to someone's dad's whiskey. He then swallowed, snorted, smoked and drank everything all together at the same time. For the rest of the evening he would lie crumpled in a corner, gurgling, with vacant eyes rolling around like pinwheels. The following day he was always bright and chipper. "That was great! Any idea what I took?" His last brain cell most likely dissolved around 1982.

I sometimes wonder whether The Mutated Lizard ever visited Hong Kong, because he would surely fit in here. The only difference is that The Mutated Lizard took any drug handed to him at a party, while Hong Kongers swallow any drug handed to them by a doctor. No labels, no explanations, no questions asked! It might come as a shock to learn that the things your doctor feeds you often aren't much different than the party drugs my friend used to take. In fact, much worse. You might not wake up bright and chipper the following morning.

Case in point: once again, a terrible flu was going around. I was incapacitated by headaches, chills and dizziness for nearly a week. I con-

sulted my doctor just to make certain that it wasn't anything worse than a normal flu. Let's call him Doctor T, in the same way that paroled felons are sometimes given a new identity, to protect them from vengeful victims. Doctor T is a relaxed, fatherly sort of guy, the kind of buddy you'd like to go fishing with. The classic wolf in sheep's clothing.

Now, you know and I know, and every doctor on earth knows, that no medicine can cure a common cold or influenza. But Hong Kong doctors never let a patient walk away empty-handed. When's the last time you saw a doctor and he or she *didn't* give you a half dozen little plastic bags filled with colourful pills? It doesn't matter if you were there for something as simple as an embarrassing skin rash after an evening in Wanchai, or blurred vision from watching too many low quality counterfeit DVDs. It doesn't matter even if you scream into the doctor's face: "Don't give me any painkillers!" You won't escape his office without at least one little baglet of pills with no identification other than ticked boxes that instruct you: 4 times daily, before/after meals.

So it was on this visit.

"I don't need any painkillers," I reminded Doctor T.

"I'll give you something for your dizziness," he said.

"What is it?" I asked him. "I don't want something that makes me drowsy."

"This one doesn't make you drowsy, don't worry," the kindly doctor assured me. I asked him about possible side effects. "Nothing to worry, no side effects," he said.

On the way out, the nurse handed me two sets of pills. At my insistence, she scribbled the names of the medicines onto their respective plastic bags. I immediately rushed home and looked them up on the Internet.

The first one was Ponstan. A general painkiller. What was it that I specifically told him I didn't want? Potential side effects are similar to aspirin – ulcers and bleeding of the gut – plus a few extras, like vomiting and blurred vision.

I knew another guy back in high school who worked in a fast food cafeteria. He used to boast about spitting in the sandwiches and putting grasshoppers in the hamburgers before wrapping them to put on display. My first suspicion was that Doctor T was playing the same kind of disgusting practical joke when he prescribed me the other medicine. I certainly felt sick to my stomach when I looked up “Stemetil”.

Stemetil is a powerful antipsychotic medication that the British Medical Association classifies as “a major tranquilliser”. So much for not making me drowsy. It’s meant to treat psychotic disorders. Stemetil is associated with numerous cases of unexpected sudden death, as well as irreversible brain damage. If it doesn’t kill you or your brain, the other side effects most commonly associated with this lovely drug include paralysis, seizures, tremors, impotence, asthma, jaundice, heart arrhythmia, depression, blood disorders, pneumonia, involuntary arm and leg movements, and facial twitching which may continue permanently even after discontinuing treatment. It can exacerbate glaucoma and liver and kidney conditions. Those are just some of the most-documented side effects. The less common ones fill several pages (source: [netdoctor.co.uk](http://netdoctor.co.uk) and others).

Why did I walk into Doctor T’s office to treat a case of flu and then walk out being treated for psychosis? Was this an unsubtle hint about my rude gwaילו manners? Maybe he was



taking a correspondence course in Psychiatry 101 from one of the dodgy professional continuing education institutes that advertise in match-books and spam e-mails. Perhaps Assignment 3A required him to dish out antipsychotics for a week and write a journal of his prognoses.

Or maybe I really needed it! Maybe I was delusional, I didn't have any flu, my symptoms were hallucinations, and Doctor T tried to save me before I did something really demented, like self-mutilation or moving to Tung Chung. Maybe, but not likely.

The best probability is that he was trying to win a 5-star holiday in – where would pill-pushers go? Colombia? No, Las Vegas! – paid for by the pharmaceutical company as a reward to any doctor who racks up a certain volume of sales. Doctor T did seem a bit tired when I saw him. He probably deserves a holiday.

Doctor T is not unusual. Going to a Hong Kong doctor is like Alice entering Wonderland and eating cakes labelled “Eat Me” and drinking bottles labelled “Drink Me”, in the desperate hope that you'll end up back home with your cat. Have you ever asked your doctor to identify and name the side effects of the drugs he or she gives you? Most Hong Kong people wouldn't dare to question such an authority as a doctor. So our medical practitioners are used to not answering such questions. Try asking! Then pay attention to the patronizing expression of impatience or even outright hostility you'll often get in return.

This sort of conversation normally ensues:

*Me:* So, um...what are these blue pills here?

*Doctor:* Anti-inflammatory.

*Me:* Hah? But I don't have any inflammation.

*Doctor:* To lessen the side effects of the other medicine.

*Me:* What other medicine? It's going to make me swell up?

*Doctor:* No, but it might make you dizzy. Then if you trip or bang your head, you take the anti-inflammatory.

*Me:* And these little green and yellow ones?

*Doctor:* Second medicine makes you sick to your stomach, so this is an anti-nausea drug. White pills are a painkiller.

*Me:* But I'm not in pain.

*Doctor:* You're going to bump your head, remember?

*Me:* Ahh! So, er... What are the names of these drugs? Can you write them down?

Doctor gives me a withering look, folds his arms, raises an eyebrow.

*Doctor:* And where did you study medicine?

*Me:* I didn't. But I have a right to know what chemicals I'm putting into my body.

*Doctor:* You ask your mechanic what kind of screws he puts in your car's engine?

*Me:* I don't have a car.

*Doctor:* You don't have an MD either. But you do have the flu, so take these and you'll feel better.

*Me:* Wait a minute. You just gave me five little bags of pills. What's the fifth one?

*Doctor:* Antipsychotic.

*Me:* What the—?!?! You're kidding! Why would you give me an anti-psychotic?

*Doctor:* Because you'd have to be mad to take all this other crud I give you.