

# What the doctor ordered?

Prescribing is a major hazard for junior doctors, writes Sara Williams. Read about Dr S's experience and avoid making the same mistake

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**Dr S is on duty in the children's area in A&E. He has just seen Jack, a two-year-old child with a high temperature. He sits down to write his notes and takes the opportunity to ask one of the nurses to give Jack 180mg of paracetamol (appropriate to weight).**

She asks for it to be prescribed, but Dr S insists that he needs the A&E card to write his notes, and the child is in the cubicle opposite the nursing station (he points to it) "you cannot miss him", he says. The nurse agrees reluctantly and goes to get the medicine and Dr S concentrates on writing on the card.

The nurse walks into the cubicle and gives the child the paracetamol. Dr S finishes his writing and approaches the cubicle to find out that there is now a different child sitting there – Alex. He anxiously turns to the nurse to find out if she has given the medication to the boy who is now in the cubicle, and she says "yes".

Dr S informs Alex's family of what has happened and explains that the paracetamol was not prescribed for their child. He apologises profusely and immediately calculates whether the paracetamol could cause an overdose. Luckily Alex was a bigger child, and had not taken any paracetamol recently, so no harm was done. Dr S makes sure Jack gets his paracetamol, and fills in an incident form; he apologises to the nurse involved and they discuss what happened, and agree that it was an easily preventable mistake. Later that day Dr S discusses the incident with his consultant.



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## Prescribing safely

The scenario above illustrates why prescribing can be a minefield and the level of vigilance and attention that is required to do it safely. It is one of the most dangerous areas for all clinicians, so the hazard warning lights in your brain should be flashing persistently when prescribing anything.

From over-prescribing, transferring incorrectly to new charts and overprescribing for the wrong patient, to forged prescriptions and overdoses, incorrect dosages, interactions and allergies, prescribing is fraught with risk.

Junior doctors can safeguard themselves by developing a good knowledge of the pharmacology and the legislation surrounding drugs, and the trust protocols and controlled drug routines. If unsure, always get a second opinion.

Make sure that you always document allergies and double-check names, doses, frequency and, in some cases, eg, anticonvulsants, brand names. You should not feel pressured to do anything beyond your competence; always take advice from a senior colleague if you are uncertain. If you are unsure about a prescription, or mishear on a ward round, always seek clarification, never guess. If a patient is admitted and there is any doubt regarding their current medication then consult the GP.

Handovers are another tricky area for junior doctors. Teams must work together in the allotted time to ensure that clinically unstable patients are identified, plans for further care are put in place and tasks not yet completed are clearly understood by seniors, as well as juniors. Patient information should be written clearly for the handover team.

## Survival tips

- Prescriptions should clearly identify the patient, the drug, the dose, frequency and start/finish dates, be written or typed and be signed by the prescriber.
- Be aware of and clearly document a patient's drug allergies.
- Good handovers require good leadership and communication.
- Refer to the *BNF*. It is accessible online if your copy goes missing.
- Verbal prescriptions are only acceptable in emergency situations and should be written up at the first available opportunity. Particular care should be taken that the correct drug and dose is used.

## Useful links

- MPS factsheet, Safe prescribing – [www.medicalprotection.org/uk/factsheets/prescribing](http://www.medicalprotection.org/uk/factsheets/prescribing)
- GMC – Good Practice in Prescribing Medicines (2006) – [www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/current/library/prescriptions\\_faqs.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/current/library/prescriptions_faqs.asp)
- BMA – *Evidence-based Prescribing (2007)* – [www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/evidencebasedprescribing?OpenDocument&Highlight=2,prescribing](http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/evidencebasedprescribing?OpenDocument&Highlight=2,prescribing)
- British National Formulary – [www.bnf.org](http://www.bnf.org).
- British National Formulary for Children – [www.bnfc.org](http://www.bnfc.org)

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