



Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

Column by Raymond C. Rowe, AstraZeneca, UK

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Science with a smile – more limericks

In a recent article¹, I commented on the use of the limerick to make humorous observations on science and yet be scientifically correct. I dealt with mathematics, physics, biology and chemistry and gave examples of limericks that were directly related to these subjects. However, a field that I did not cover, primarily because of lack of space and yet one that is well provided with limericks, is that of medical science. Why this field is so well provided for is open to debate. It could be that workers in this field enjoy expressing themselves in poetry, and the limerick, being a very simple form of poetry, provides them with an easy way of conveying humour without interfering with the overall message. All areas of medical science have been infiltrated by the limerick and I have selected examples on several themes.

Symptoms and disease states

The descriptions of symptoms, illnesses and disease states provide a rich source of tongue-twisting sequences of words as exemplified by²:

Whenever he got in a fury a
Schizophrenic from Upper Manchuria,
Had pseudocyesis,

Disdiadochokinesis
And haematoporphyrinuria.

For those who do not have a medical dictionary at hand, pseudocyesis is false pregnancy, disdiadochokinesis is the loss of the ability to perform rapid alternate movements and haematoporphyrinuria is the presence of porphyrins in the urine. Hence, the poor fellow would have presented a rather pitiful sight with an enlarged abdomen, morning sickness, the loss of the ability to wind up his watch and discoloured urine, as well as being mentally unstable!

Tuberculosis is a disease that, despite being almost eradicated through the use of antibiotics, is once again on the increase in the population. A limerick that describes the disease and a method of treatment goes as follows²:

Pulmonary tuberculosis
Is all very well in small doses.
But a gap in the lung
As big as a bung
Means years while you twiddle
your toeses.

The last line refers to the main method of treatment before the advent of

antibiotics, that of prolonged rest in a sanatorium.

A trio of limericks written by Milton J. Chatton from San Jose (CA, USA) in 1972 (Ref. 3) is a good example of using the genre to make a humorous comment on a colleague's scientific work. Entitled *Methanosis*, it refers to a report previously published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by Duane and Leavitt⁴:

Our thanks to frank Doctor Duane
Who takes the time to explain
Just how he had noted
That his stools often floated
Before they were flushed down the
drain.

He must have thought first, 'Mama mia!
Do I suffer from steatorrhea?
But it cannot be that –
There is no trace of fat.'
Which led to another idea.

Well aware of the gas he unloosed
The doctor quite shrewdly deduced,
(Almost clairvoyant)
His faeces were buoyant
Because of the methane produced.

Drugs and medicines

The plant kingdom, with its >250,000 species, is an abundant natural source of chemicals, some of which have been, and still are being, used as medicines. Richard Cowen from the University of California, Davis (CA, USA), and author of the best selling book *History of Life*, uses a limerick to comment on this fact⁵:

We're proud of humanity's powers
But these potions and medicines of ours
Coffee, garlic, and spices,
Evolved as devices
So that insects would stop bugging
flowers.

However, naturally occurring chemicals with pharmacological properties are not exclusively limited to the plant

kingdom, they can also be extracted from insects. One such compound is cantharidin, a lactone of cantharidic acid. Commonly referred to as cantharides or Spanish Fly, it is extracted from the beetle *Lytta vesicatoria*. Although a potent irritant poison, it has been used both externally as a rubefacient and internally as a diuretic and aphrodisiac. Its aphrodisiac properties are implied in a little known limerick by the essayist Aldous Huxley (1894–1963; Ref. 2):

There was a young fellow of Burma
Whose bethrothed had a good
cause to murmur.
But now that he's married, he's
Been using cantharides
And the roots of his love are much
firmer.

A limerick that has particular interest to me as a pharmacist is²:

There was an old lady from
Leicester,
Whose numerous ailments
obsessed her,
She found no allure
In an M and B cure,
And sedatives simply depressed
her.

M and B refers to May and Baker of Dagenham (London, UK) now part of Aventis (Parsippany, NJ, USA). The cure referred to is possibly Largactil (chlorpromazine hydrochloride), which was originally an M and B product but is now produced by Hawgreen (Stillorgan, County Dublin, Ireland).

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a specific area of medical science that is well provided with limericks of which many deal with the theories of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), for example²:

Said Freud, 'I've discovered the id.
Of all your repressions be rid.

It won't ease the gravity
Of all the depravity,
But you'll know why you did what
you did.'

According to Freud, the id with the ego and super-ego are the three agencies of human personality. Id specifically controls the psychic content relative to sex and aggression and can be studied through the analysis of dreams and neurotic symptoms²:

'If you dream,' said the eminent Freud,
'Your id is in doubt, or annoyed
By neuroses complex
From suppression of sex,
So passions are best if enjoyed.'

Of course, there are many more limericks on this theme, many ribald with sexual connotations.

Towards the end of his life, and much to his chagrin, many of Freud's colleagues broke with him forming their own theories. It is interesting to note that even this aspect of his life was preserved for posterity in a limerick²:

A quirky old gent name of Freud,
Was, not without reason, aneud
That his concept of id,
And all that id did,
Was so starkly and loosely empleud.

The spellings are as in the original limerick².

Final word

It can be seen from the examples given above, and others in my earlier article¹, that the limerick, by providing a humorous look at the oddities and eccentricities of science, is able to reveal a side of the subject matter that often gets lost in its technical writing. I hope that these two articles will provoke a response in the readers of the *Drug Discovery Today* to be creative and write a limerick or two that is relevant to drug discovery and development because this is, at present, devoid of the genre.

References

- 1 Rowe, R.C. (2001) Science with a smile – the limerick. *Drug Discov. Today* 6, 712–713
- 2 Parrot, E.O., ed. (1983) *A Penguin Book of Limericks*, Penguin Books
- 3 Chatton, M.J. (1972) Methanosis. *New Engl. J. Med.* 287, 362
- 4 Duane, W.C. and Leavitt, M.D. (1972) Floating stools – flatus versus fat. *New Engl. J. Med.* 286, 973
- 5 Cowen, R., ed. (1994) *History of Life* (2nd edn), Blackwell Science

Raymond C. Rowe

Pharmaceutical and Analytical R&D
AstraZeneca, Alderley Park
Macclesfield, Cheshire, UK SK10 2NA
tel: +44 1625 513112
fax: +44 1625 512381
e-mail: Ray.Rowe@astrazeneca.com

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