

## “Early innings” in medical weed branding

Over here, you have your Crestor and Nexium, your Humira and Avastin. Over there, you have your Nyce N’ EZ and Great White Shark, your Cheese Quake and Trainwreck. If you wanted an indicator of just how much regulations differ between the pharmaceutical industry and the emerging medical marijuana sector, product names wouldn’t be a bad place to start.

Pharmaceutical companies are among the most regulated corporations on the planet, and as explained in a recent *CMAJ* article (2014;186:1053), the rigid rules extend to allowable product names. Most of the 200-plus products listed on the websites of Canada’s licensed growers of medical cannabis, however, don’t sound all that medicinal. As can be seen in a *CMAJ* infographic (2014;186:E440), many of the names are actually rather silly.

“The brand name has a real ability to shape how we think about something,” says R. John Fidelino, executive creative director for InterbrandHealth, an agency based in New York and behind such pharmaceutical brand names as Viagra and Prozac.

“In terms of medical usage of marijuana, perhaps the more serious the name, the more discerning the public can become about its use. The converse is true as well; the more trivial the name, the less discerning. In fact, the more trivial names could actually encourage more flagrant abuse. Serious language helps to curtail frivolous behaviour.”

How many of these trivial names would make it through the approval process for pharmaceuticals at health regulators such as the US Food and Drug Administration? Hardly any, according to Scott Piergrossi, vice-president, creative, at Brand Institute, a Miami-based company that develops brand names for drugs, including Levitra and Lipitor.

“The variation of strategies and name types here really shows that in the absence of regulation it can be confusing. What is each product name



There appear to be no rules to guide product naming for medical marijuana strains.

meant to suggest or communicate? Which should I trust? Which are just whimsical?” says Piergrossi.

“In the pharmaceutical industry, you have to communicate ideas with more subtlety because you are working under such tight regulations. When you have free rein, the nuances of language aren’t so important.”

Many names of medical cannabis strains would fail US pharmaceutical regulations for being too fanciful (Critical Super Silver Haze, Tangerine Dream, Afghani Bullrider) or overly promotional (The Ultimate, Pure Kush, Holy Grail Kush). Others would be out for not actually containing the substance in their name (Blue Cheese, Bubblegum, Mango). Another no-no is a modifier that overpromises efficacy, such as “happy” (so long Happy Face and Happy Feet) or “super” (adios Superbud and Super Lemon Haze).

“We are clearly in the early innings of this industry,” says Piergrossi. “Naming regulation is a later-stage development.”

A few licensed growers, however, have taken product branding seriously. Bedrocan Canada, for example, offers five products that borrow from the company’s name (Bedrocan, Bedropuur, etc.). Mettrum has taken a similar approach while incorporating a colour scheme (Mettrum Red No 1, etc.). And

MedReleaf uses names that wouldn’t look out of place on the shelves of a drugstore (Claritas, Cerebri, Potentia).

A company that is trying to establish its wares as medical products with legitimate therapeutic benefits would be wise to align their names with that strategy, says Lea Prevel Katsanis, a professor of marketing at Concordia University in Montréal, who used to work in the pharmaceutical industry. Names that are silly or childish don’t reflect the seriousness of the medical conditions of many of the clients of medical marijuana growers.

“These people are seriously ill,” says Katsanis. “You definitely want to move away from street names.”

That doesn’t mean, however, that naming conventions should evolve to mimic drug names, says Fidelino. The extent of the work required to create a drug, from research to regulatory approval, in no way resembles the effort required to grow a plant, says Fidelino. So why should their products have similar names?

“Shouldn’t there be a different nomenclature system for the medical marijuana system that distinguishes it from pharmaceuticals?” asks Fidelino. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

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