

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON PRESCRIPTION WRITING BOTH IN LATIN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES**

A prescription is a health-care program implemented by a physician or other qualified health care practitioner in the form of instructions that govern the plan of care for an individual patient [3, p. 390]. The term often refers to a health care provider's written authorization for a patient to purchase a prescription drug from a pharmacist.

The word "*prescription*", from "*pre-*" ("*before*") and "*script*" ("*writing, written*"), refers to the fact that the prescription is an order that must be written down before a compound drug can be prepared. The format of a prescription falls in to seven parts. However, with modern prescribing habits, some are no longer applicable or included on an everyday basis [4, p. 120].

In continental Europe, prescriptions differ from their counterparts in the English-speaking world. With the exception of patient directions, they are written out entirely in abbreviations deriving from the Latin language. Furthermore, a larger proportion of prescriptions are compounded, and appropriate abbreviations and phrases exist for this. A continental European prescription consists of three parts: *the praescriptio* is the prescription itself; that is, directions to the dispensing pharmacist to supply medication, made up of the following: *the invocatio*, consisting of the abbreviation Rp; this is analogous to the Rx used in the English-speaking world, and stands for recipe, Latin for take [from the shelf] and *the ordinatio*, also known as the *compositio*, which consists either of the brand name, strength, and number and type of dosage units of a particular drug, or else of directions written entirely in the Latin accusative case, with the exception of ingredient names, written in the genitive case. Masses are written in grams, without the unit name. The *compositio* is followed by *the subscriptio*, which consists of the directions according

to which the medicament is to be prepared. An important part of this is *the signatura*, which is directed towards the patient and explains how to use the medication. Unlike the rest of the prescription, the signatura is written in national language.

Modern prescriptions are actually extemporaneous prescriptions (from the Latin *ex tempore = at/from the time*) [1, p. 200] meaning that the prescription is written on the spot for a specific patient with a specific ailment. This is distinguished from a non-extemporaneous prescription that is a generic recipe for a general ailment. Modern prescriptions in the English-speaking world evolved with the separation of the role of the pharmacists from that of the physician [1, p. 202-205]. Today the term extemporaneous prescriptions is reserved for compound prescriptions that requires the pharmacist to mix or compound the medication in the pharmacy for the specific needs of the patient.

Predating modern legal definitions of a prescription, a prescription traditionally is composed of four parts: *a superscription, inscription, subscription, and signature* [5, p. 38-40].

The superscription section contains the date of the prescription and patient information (name, address, age, etc.). The symbol "*R*" separates the superscription from the inscriptions sections. In this arrangement of the prescription, the "*R*" is a symbol for recipe or literally the imperative "*take!*" This is an exhortation to the pharmacist by the medical practitioner, "*I want the patient to have the following medication*" [5, p. 41] – in other words, "*take the following components and compound this medication for the patient*".

'*R*' is a symbol meaning "*recipe*". It is sometimes transliterated as "*Rx*" or just "*Rx*". This symbol originated in medieval manuscripts as an abbreviation of the late Latin verb *recipere*, specifically the second person singular imperative form *recipe* meaning "*take*", thus: "*take thou*" [3, p. 391]. Originally abbreviated *Rc*, the *c* was simplified and finally written as a straight stroke making it look like an *x* in

combination with the right "leg" of R. Medieval prescriptions invariably began with the command to "take" certain materials and compound them in specified ways.

Folk theories about the origin of the symbol '℞' note its similarity to the Eye of Horus, or to the ancient symbol for Zeus or Jupiter, (♁), gods whose protection may have been sought in medical contexts [4, p. 110].

**The inscription** section defines what the medication is. The inscription section is further composed of one or more of: a basis or chief ingredient intended to cure (*curare*); an adjuvant to assist its action and make it cure quickly (*cito*); a corrective to prevent or lessen any undesirable effect (*tuto*); a vehicle or excipient to make it suitable for administration and pleasant to the patient (*jucunde*) [2, p. 155].

**The subscription** section contains dispensing directions to the pharmacist. This may be compounding instructions or quantities.

**The signature** section contains directions to the patient and is often abbreviated "Sig." or "Signa" [2, p. 112-114] It also obviously contains the signature of the prescribing medical practitioner though the word signature has two distinct meanings here and the abbreviations are sometimes used to avoid confusion.

The idea of prescriptions dates back to the beginning of history. So long as there were medications and a writing system to capture directions for preparation and usage, there were prescriptions.

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