

Medicine Man

Mathieu Lehanneur's fantastic pharmaceuticals

Clara Young

EVERY SUNDAY, a youngish friend of mine, who recently suffered a heart attack, puts a week's worth of pills into his seven-day dispenser. For each day there is a big yellowy-pink oval vitamin pill, an orange Graval-like Plavix pill, a specially-coated aspirin and, lastly, a quarter Bisoprolol, a long white pill which he cuts into pieces using a mechanism that looks like a tiny paper-cutter. After he takes his four Monday-morning pills, he puts a cholesterol-reducing Lipitor pill into the now-empty compartment, to remind him to take it at seven that evening. This he often forgets to do. Then, on Tuesday, he repeats the ritual.

'It's a little like being in prison and scratching each passing day into your cell wall,' he says. 'It makes time move in a very concrete way, but it's sheer drudgery.' At one time or another during their lives, most people will have to undergo the ritual of daily medication. For some, it's an occasional weeklong regimen of antibiotics, with painkillers and decongestants thrown in throughout the day. For others, it may be a permanent treatment – a diabetic's morning insulin shot, an asthmatic's inhaler puff or an HIV-positive person's antiretroviral cocktail. Whatever form it takes, medicating oneself has inevitable side effects: we

become addicted to the pills, we don't believe in the pills, we submit to them, we rebel against them, we forget to take them.

French industrial designer Mathieu Lehanneur believes that today's medication – the forms it comes in and the ways it is taken – ignores the psychology of the patient. Consequently, he has created an ongoing series of medicative devices, titled *Therapeutic Objects* and showcased in MoMA's autumn exhibition, *SAFE: Design Takes on a Risk*, that are designed to heal and palliate in a psychological as much as a chemical capacity.

Antibiotics in Layers (all works 2001) is a large 'onion' of multi-coloured antibiotic papers that the patient tears off one by one and ingests at the required intervals. When the onion is gone, the treatment is over. By dwindling, the onion has transformed a nebulous healing process into something definite and tangible. 'It works a little like an advent calendar,' says Lehanneur. 'It's a strategy for making time go by more quickly.'

'When I first began working on this project,' he says, 'I felt that medication was something that had not been properly thought through, and that it is the key in a very complex relationship. Doctors typically classify treatments in terms of the nature of

Facing page from top
*Prescription in bag
configuration*, 2001,
paper, 14 x 7 x 20 cm
PHOTO: © VÉRONIQUE HUYGHE

Liquid Bone, 2001,
compressed effervescent
powder, 8 x 1 x 1 cm
PHOTO: © VÉRONIQUE HUYGHE
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LEHANNEUR

the illness – is it chronic, acute, terminal? Is it healable? – rather than in terms of different kinds of patient behaviours. I spent some time observing the behaviour of ill people and came up with a set of classifications that I believe all patients fall into: those who are dealing with imagined illnesses; those who fight against their illness and want to drive it out of their bodies; others who co-exist with their illnesses; and, finally, patients who refuse to believe they are ill. Every doctor I talked to agreed that all their patients fell into one of these categories. So patient behaviour was the starting point of my project, not the illnesses themselves.' The antibiotic onion was designed for patients who have a conflictual relationship with their illness. For patients of that category, Lehanneur also designed *Medicine by the Centimetre*, a string of individual dosages of oestrogen (to be taken nasally), the length of which is determined by the duration of the treatment prescribed. It looks like a set of pharmaceutical rosary beads – a reference that is not accidental.

To Lehanneur, ritual is the forgotten component in modern medicine. In his notes, he comments on the disappearance

of 'healers and apothecaries [who] took with them the mystery and magic of healing illnesses', and later remarks that 'via the doctor's prescription, medication is close to the Catholic Eucharist.' While many of his devices – like *Antibiotics in Layers* – seek to make drugs more transparent, definite and comprehensible, others remind us of the opacity of healing, and the unquantifiable bodily comfort of ritual. Designed to assist insomniacs, *Sleep Wand* belongs to Lehanneur's imaginary illness category. Sufferers place a clear wand in a glass of water, stir until the wand dissolves – a five-minute process – and then drink the resultant solution. The wand, however, is a placebo; it is the performative act, the ritual stirring and waiting that Lehanneur believes induces drowsiness.

Lehanneur is a graduate of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle in Paris. While there, he made pocket money by acting as a guinea pig for pharmaceutical labs, and that is where he first got the idea of designing medicative devices. 'I got tested for medication that thins the blood and medication that expands lung capacity,' he says. 'During those testing

we expect our pills – and not just the proverbial ones – to be hard and bitter to swallow, that is the paradox of medication

procedures I would be given the medicine and then a team of doctors and nurses would come and look at me. The testing was always governed by a very strict protocol. It was like Catholic mass. And I realized that whatever the medication was, it already had an effect simply because there was this protocol in place. And then I thought about somebody who is alone at home, taking his medicine without the protocol, without the doctors and nurses administering it to him and examining him, and how less effective medicine is in that kind of context. I read a study that said that 50 percent of the time, medication is not properly taken. People take it irregularly, or they take too much of it,

or they don't believe in it and stop taking it too early.' Today, as doctor-patient encounters grow increasingly less frequent (thanks to Internet and telephone diagnosis, as well as more general cost-cutting), medicine is prescribed and taken in isolation with little follow-up. Lehanneur believes that medication can be designed in such a manner that it evokes some of the shamanistic ceremony we have lost along the way.

Besides the performative aspect that is designed into many of his devices, Lehanneur has created medicines that illustrate the effects of an illness (based on the 'theory of signatures', a doctrine developed during the sixteenth century according to which the form and appearance of a medical remedy dictates its healing properties). For recalcitrant patients who have osteoporosis, a condition in which bones become increasingly brittle, he designed *Liquid Bone*. The product consists mainly of calcium, vitamin D and bisphosphonate and is taken orally, dissolved in water. As it effervesces, the bone slowly develops gaping pores and, then, disintegrates; a cautionary warning of the disease at work in the patient's body. *Third Lung* is another device designed for patients in the refusal category. It prods asthmatic sufferers into taking their medicine by creating a physical symbiotic relationship between patient and medicine. The 'lung' is a flat box with flexible elastomer skin. Through the night, it slowly fills with asthmatic spray; by morning, the box is swollen and distended. The asthma sufferer 'relieves' the lung by sucking in the air and medication.

Lehanneur has shown his prototypes to pharmaceutical labs, but there are no takers yet. 'Intellectually, they were very interested but they were concerned that people would think they were toys,' he says. And, it is true, some of his objects, like the *Therapeutic Handkerchief*, a product aimed at hayfever sufferers with a little pocket for nasal spray, could be described as whimsical. Playful is the last thing that pharmaceutical companies want their drugs to be. Except for anti-depressants like Venlafaxine, which are marketed – controversially – in cheerful colours and friendly shapes, medication tends to appear disagreeable, as proof of its effectiveness. Why else the unpronounceable names, bitter flavours and dour colours? This is not to say that pharmaceutical companies and outlets aren't becoming more market-savvy and design-conscious. The American retail chain Target recently adopted a new prescription pill bottle designed by an M.F.A. graduate at New York's School of Visual Arts. Its D-shaped, cap-down bottle with colour-coded rings and

rationally organized label is a much-needed departure from the round, transparent yellow bottles with the hard-to-read label slapped on. User-friendly medicine delivery systems, like patches that absorb medicine into the skin, are now standard. And high-pressure vaccine guns that penetrate the skin without puncturing it, replacing painful needles and syringes, are starting to come into usage. But, despite the innovation, there is still the sense that taking medicines must not be an entirely pleasant experience. Deep down, we expect our pills – and not just the proverbial ones – to be hard and bitter to swallow, that is the paradox of medication. In fact, the Greek word 'pharmakon' means both remedy and poison – what heals you can also kill you. To illustrate this point, Lehanneur tells the story of an asthmatic spray launched by one laboratory which didn't have the usual bitter aftertaste. 'People brought the spray back to the doctor and asked for the old one back, because they couldn't tell whether it was working or not. The bad taste had a function.'

Lehanneur is alert to the strange repulsion factor in drugs. He is also protective of what he sees as the mystery at the heart of medical practice. We do not want our medicines to be too appealing; neither do we want them to be too understandable. Deliberate obfuscation is what Lehanneur thinks is at work in the physician's indeci-

pherable Rx – the scrawl that 'recreates the magic inherent in prescription.' His paper prescription bag starts out as an Rx form that the doctor writes the prescription on. As soon as you take it to the chemist to be converted into drugs, the Rx folds out into a handy paper bag, perforated 'to keep the confidentiality of the prescription, so that people can no longer read which medicines were prescribed'. By alluding to the arcane spells and magic potions that medical prescriptions originated from and the quasi-religious rituals, symbols and shamans that once characterized medicine, Lehanneur is guaranteeing that his devices will not be popular with medical and pharmaceutical establishments. His objects ask us to think beyond syrups, pills and capsules. They remind us that, ultimately, the patient has just as much control over the healing process as any medication. ♦

SAFE: Design Takes on a Risk is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York from 16 October 2005 to 2 January 2006



From top
Medicine by the Centimetre, 2001,
plastic, nasal vaporizer,
20 x 20 x 1 cm
PHOTO: © VÉRONIQUE HUNGHE

Liquid Bone, 2001,
compressed effervescent
powder, 8 x 1 x 1 cm
PHOTO: © VÉRONIQUE HUNGHE