

The oblique view



We continue our series where Consultant Interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab and beyond. In this column, he looks at how cardiologists can personalise their cars.

Have they got your number?

Introduction

I was sitting on the M1 last week (in a car, obviously) held up because of lane closures, a pile up, barrier repairs, sheer volume of traffic, an "incident", a body found underneath a bridge, or possibly all of these. Alternatively, I suspect that two lanes had been coned off for four miles in order to allow a team from the Highways Agency sufficient safe working space to clear a cigarette packet that had strayed dangerously close to the central reservation during a recent gusty spell.

The stretch of tarmac between Northampton and Milton Keynes is not noted for its stunning views, so my attention was largely – if not entirely – fixed on the number plate of the sad, silver (originally) Mercedes that sat in front of my bonnet at varying distances depending on how enthusiastic I was about keeping up with the vehicular flow. And it got me thinking...

Car owners are divided into those that don't give a hoot (or a parp?) about their vehicle registration number, and a small but increasing proportion who spend much energy, time and money in

personalising the plastic strips that adorn each end of their beloved motors. I know for a fact that cardiologists (well, at least one) are not immune from this obsession. Is this simply a reflection of the nature of the beast – the need to be individual, yearning to be different, striving to stand out from the crowd? Or is it that the specialty itself is riddled with so many three-letter abbreviations that it provides the perfect medium in which to express that which is quintessentially 'us'? I suspect that you are now beginning to appreciate just how long this queue of traffic actually was.)

I am not so interested in the use of one's initials, although I appreciate that this still says something about the owner – perhaps that he is occasionally prone to forgetting his name. I am more intrigued with the use of cardiological terms, and thereby the range of possibilities that present themselves to the more imaginative and committed car owning heart specialist.

The trick is to avoid making them so obscure that you have to explain your particular alphanumeric combi-

nation to everyone – well at least to those who, for some unfortunate reason, make the mistake of asking you whether the LVH, AMI, or LAD that adorn the fore and aft of your Volvo might conceivably have some sort of circulatory connotation. (ECG is easy because it is appreciated by colleagues and patients.)

Getting hold of the right plate used to attract a degree of cachet. It might have taken years to track down the perfect item through the small ads and the Sunday papers, and then to negotiate a price for the car that you didn't really want, but that was usually attached.

Nowadays, there's nothing to it! The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) have twigged that there is revenue to be gleaned by retaining, and later selling off at higher prices, certain attractive combinations. If the plate is available, then the price depends on whether the year is current, with the single digit '1' being most expensive, 2 to 9 less, and double or treble figures, least. (My offer to the Licensing Authority of specialist

advice as to which letter assortments would be particularly suited to my colleagues has thus far been ignored). Nevertheless, the following paragraphs might provide some examples.

Numberplate

mnemonics.....

JVP, EDP and (forgive me) VPB are straightforward enough. It starts to get more demanding when the letters sit alongside various numerals. The recent need to incorporate a two-letter prefix now allows many more exciting possibilities. I think that G0 4 PCI is quite clever, and certainly less concerning than A1 4 VF. For the clinical pharmacologists amongst you, I might suggest H1 BP or L1 PID, whilst those who hanker after traditional bedside teaching might prefer S1 LUB, S2 DUP or even 316 ESM (think about it).

A cardiac surgeon who excels in mitral valve repair could consider P2 MVR, but the degree of expertise required to follow the thought processes involved is likely to overwhelm his colleagues, as well as most of you. There is little to be gained from being so obtuse that only you appreciate the

thinking behind such a sequence. So, if to understand the reasoning underlying T39 SBE, one requires a copy of the Da Vinci Code, I would suggest getting a bike instead.

And why shouldn't patients share in this immensely satisfying experience? A heart failure patient on excessive diuretic therapy might helpfully remind their physician with K3 LOW, whilst one who is being followed up with aortic stenosis should have AVG 40 (with instructions to change this annually, of course). DUN 4 would best be avoided.

.... and phone number catch phrases

I suspect that one of the reasons we want to stamp our own mark, is to resist the ever increasing tendency for so many facets of our lives to be distilled down to a series of letters or numerals. It was Patrick McGoochan as 'The Prisoner', who said famously, "I am not a number, I am a free man". We should strive to maintain our individuality in this alphanumeric world. (That second bit wasn't him; it was me). That is why I am quite taken with American adverts in which companies give their phone numbers often as catchy phrases. They remind us to, "Touch 0800 HEART-DOC for all your cardiac concerns". British Gas might more truthfully use 0870 WAIT-4-EVER, and as for my bank, I suspect 0845 DONT-BOTH-

ER would be most appropriate.

Telephone numbers used to incorporate a three letter prefix which identified the local exchange. There was something quaint and romantic about giving your number as TUDor 3656 or HIGHgate 3979, while MAYfair 872 or BELgravia 3841 would certainly raise the odd eyebrow. I do wonder whether WHIttehall 1212 will still get you through to Scotland Yard (and perhaps – as in the long forgotten TV police series 'No Hiding Place' – directly to the right ear of Detective Chief Superintendent Lockhart).

But I digress, perhaps because the M1 has not improved. Today, having been stationary for the last two hours I suspect a car fire or a jack-knifed lorry at Junction 13. This has, however, allowed me to write this piece on my laptop, and take more than a passing interest in the blue Peugeot in front. A nodding wife in the passenger seat, a nodding Alsatian on the back shelf, and an apposite number plate which, coincidentally, I can now use . . . B1 4 NOW.

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