to give an expiry date to the worst names, and the licensing rules could be used now to prevent names that make unjustifiable claims. Perhaps there should be an international prize each year to be awarded for the most honest, optimistic, and pleasant product name, and an award for the worst name of the year.

Meanwhile, all doctors should be encouraged to look at their own practice, to examine the non-specific ingredients that they use daily, and those that they do not use. Giving greater attention in daily practice to "adjuvants" (specific as well as non-specific) could considerably increase effectiveness and efficiency—for example, by saying more useful things to patients in better ways. Methods will be needed for implement-

ing such approaches. Until they are available, good common sense and old fashioned bedside manners might already take us far—as they say, when all else fails talk to your patient.

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The magic of seven

Signifies creation, the sum of the spiritual three and the material four

See pp 1592, 1597

The seven ages of man, the seven seas, the seven deadly sins (p 1592), the seven league boot, seventh heaven, the seven wonders of the world, the seven pillars of wisdom, Snow White and the seven dwarves, 7-up.... There are an awful lot of sevens around. Numerologists see seven as the sum of the spiritual three and the material four, signifying creation. The Old Testament tells us that the world was created in seven days. The seventh generation after Adam produced Lamech, who lived for 777 years and was to be avenged 77 fold. Psalm 90 sets the human life span at seven decades. Solomon's temple has seven steps, and Noah's dove returns after seven days.

In the Hippocratic tradition the number seven governs the ailments of the body. In Germany it was believed that people would not catch swine fever if they spent seven days drinking and bathing in water containing asphodel. A Jewish cure for fever involved taking "seven prickles from seven palmtrees, seven chips from seven beams, seven nails from seven doors," and so on up to "seven hairs from the beard of an old dog." And in this issue of the *BMJ* a long but neglected tradition alleging seven year cycles in human development is vindicated in Jos Verhulst and Patrick Onghena's finding of a circaseptennial (roughly seven year) rhythm in the growth of male human ears (p 1597).²

In Iranian folklore the cat has seven, not nine, lives and carries her kittens seven times to seven different places.¹ "To do the work of seven mullahs" means to accomplish absolutely nothing. In ancient India the most important numbers were three and seven. The ancient Indian text *Rigveda* talks of seven stars and seven streams of soma (the drink of the gods).¹ Indra, the rain god, is "the seven-slayer," the ocean has seven depths, and there are seven concentric continents. The sacred cow has 21 names—three times seven.

In ancient Greece, seven was associated with Athena, the virgin goddess, because it is neither producing nor produced—that is, it has no multiple in the first decade (1-10) and also no divisor (other than 1). The first property has little mathematical importance, but the second tells us that seven is a prime

number—having no divisors other than itself and one. It is the second Mersenne prime—one less than a power of two.³

Seven numbers suffice to colour every map on a torus—a surface shaped like a doughnut with a central hole—so that no two adjacent regions have the same colour. The smallest regular polygon that cannot be constructed using ruler and compasses is the heptagon, with seven sides. All sufficiently large whole numbers are the sum of seven perfect cubes. And if you want to get more esoteric, the unit sphere in a multidimensional space has the greatest surface area when the space has dimension seven.

Seven is an astronomical number. The week has seven days because successive phases of the moon occur roughly seven days apart. Other astronomical sevens include the "seven sisters," the stars of the constellation of the Pleiades, and—in ancient times only—the seven planets: Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. In Douglas Adams's *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* the answer to the "Great Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything," is 42 (six times seven).⁴ In November 1996 the *Independent* reported the latest measurements of Hubble's constant—a fundamental physical quantity that determines the rate of growth of our expanding universe.⁵ "Dr Richard Saunders," the newspaper wrote, "sounded a trifle abashed by the result. 'We have taken two measurements for the constant, and the average of them is, well, it's 42.'"

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