Name that name

For the uninitiated or the newbie in the practice the maze of instruments and equipment is a bewilderment...Why are there so many names to remember?

Stephen Hancocks investigates.

If either Romeo or Juliet had been a DCP, might Shakespeare have written instead 'a rose head by any other name would smell as sweet'? Well, probably not, after all there isn't anything too romantic about a bur even when it's brand spanking shiny new let alone after it's just been ground around inside someone's carious tooth.

Dentists, being practical sorts of people possessing an irrepressible love affair with gadgets, have for centuries invented 'new' instruments that are very similar to existing ones while at the same time being ever-so-slightly not quite the same. In order to denote the significance (in their eyes at least) of this innovative variant they have dubbed it with their own name in the hope of posterity. So the Aston-Field half-back scaler may look suspiciously like the Grove curette but in reality it has a 7° difference in its reverse angle cutting edge for gaining extra access around the most posterior of molars. While it might seem like a small thing to us, to Mr Aston-Field (Jeremiah to his colleagues) it represented a lifetime's labour in his workshop, over a sharpening stone and in countless patients' mouths as he battled against the former supremacy of Bert Grove's soon to be obsolete curette.

Originally, manufacturers thought such variation was wonderful. They could fill catalogue page after catalogue page with ranks of silver-shafted elevators all of which would have their own niche market in different parts of the country depending on where the inventor taught and consequently where his students bought them. But with the age of economy and mass production the wide range held less and less appeal and so the days of the Pitney-Cavendish excavator and the Wimbourne-Mucklehide left-handed plaster of Paris spatula were numbered.

Not that numbering might be such a bad idea. Much more logical, certainly easier to convert into computer-friendly key strokes, the idea of a 284976179 probe might have caught on if it weren't for the fact that no one could actually remember what its name was. A four-digit PIN number is hard enough to recall at a cash machine never mind attempting to speedily choose a 67834 from a 98023 – especially with rubber gloves on. It was a mistake that the then British Rail made by stripping their trains of the evocative names of the past to replace them with logical numbers for reasons of efficiency. Not a handful of years later, dignitaries up and down the land were back on windy station platforms tugging miniature velvet curtains apart with tasselled cords at ceremonies to re-christen and re-romanticise the age of railway travel.

Although the Golden Arrow Air Turbine or the Brighton Belle Three-in-One Syringe hasn't got quite the same dashing effect.

Diseases also possess a rather clumsy heritage of designations which seem to have been chosen with the sole purpose of confusing everyone; but most especially students.

Those with really grand names are usually the most rare, giving them

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the air of deep-pile carpet and private patient exclusivity. So that although you are not likely to see a case of Morag-Spicer-Moult Syndrome pass through your surgery in a lifetime of practice, you cannot help but be impressed that it even exists. The truth is that the more common diseases and conditions could all have been snapped up ages ago by the first person to diagnose them but, like the frequency of their occurrence, so too would have been the commonality of the names of the practitioners. Consequently, Smith's caries, Jones' gingivitis or Brown's periodontal pockets hardly have much of a ring to them at all, so much easier just to miss off the names completely.

Then again think of the terrible dilemma of someone whose surname was already descriptive of the implement that they had designed but which they desperately wanted to brand as their own. Imagine, for example, the agony if a Dr Clamp had invented the rubber dam clamp. Could he have called it the Clamp Clamp or would people just have thought he had a speech impediment? On the other hand would it have been worth the awful palaver of changing his name, and if so, to what?

Which brings us back to the humble rose-head. Surprisingly, history is mysteriously silent on who invented the famous drill bit, possibly because it was named after its shape - like a rose head - rather than by Gary Rosehead of Essex. Or was it? Maybe the real inventor had wanted it to bear his name down the years but somehow 'pass me a Gary' didn't have quite the right amount of seriousness in clinical circles. Which could also provide a lesson to us all if we think our children might give their names to future instruments or diseases – choose that 'any other name' carefully!