

Preface

Believe it or not, some chemists do have a sense of humour, and this book is a testament to that. On the following pages I'll show you some *real* molecules that have unusual, ridiculous or downright silly names. Some of the molecule names are bizarre, some make you wonder how supposedly serious scientists could possibly have called a molecule *that*, and some are very rude indeed!

Although the object of this book is mainly entertainment, I've tried to include a fair bit of science along the way, along with the references if you want to check that I didn't make it all up! Most of the molecules have their full structure shown, and with some I've included brief facts about their history and what they're used for. As well as molecules, I've also included some of my favourites from the vast number of minerals, proteins and genes that have often accidentally (or deliberately!) been given ludicrous names. Despite the humorous and often irreverent nature of the content, I'm hoping that the reader might unknowingly pick up quite a bit of chemistry along the way - learning chemistry 'by stealth', as it were.

So how did this book come about? Well, as you might have guessed, it started in the pub. I was having a drink with a few Chemistry colleagues one Friday after work in 1997, and the subject of the conversation somehow got around to molecules with unusual names. I mentioned that I'd just read about a mineral called *cumingtonite*, and everyone thought this was hilarious. A friend then bettered this by telling me that there was a genuine molecule called *arsole*. Within half an hour, between us, we'd come up with

about 15 genuine molecules with ridiculous names. Back then, I'd just started writing webpages, so it was suggested that I should make a fun webpage of these, to share the joke with other friends who hadn't been fortunate enough to be at the pub that night. I did this, and within days I had people emailing me from all over the world saying they loved the site, and suggesting new molecules to add to the collection. Over the past decade the website expanded to nearly 250 molecules. The site gained infamy when it was featured in the science/humour sections of many top newspapers, including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *USA Today*, as well as serious science magazines such as *Science*, *Scientific American* and *New Scientist*. *Playboy* magazine even paid me to reproduce some of the more dubiously named molecules in their humour column!

But how do the silly molecule names arise? Some names legitimately derive from the molecular structure, or from the location where the molecules were first discovered. Many come from the (Latin) name for the plant or animal species from which the molecules were isolated, or even from the name of the discoverer. Some molecules are given intentionally trivial names based on their structure, or simply as a result of the whimsy of chemists. Since trivial names predate formal naming conventions, they can be ambiguous or carry different meanings in different industries, geographic regions and languages. And the result of the (un)fortunate juxtaposition of innocent compound phrases can give rise to unintended but hilarious names (*e.g.* cummington + ite).

However, not everyone has access to the internet (yet), so I thought it might be a good idea to make a hardcopy version of the website to entertain (and educate) those people too. The original website is still going strong, and you are welcome to visit it:

<http://www.chm.bris.ac.uk/sillymolecules/sillymols.htm>

There, you'll find more information on the molecules, plus many colour diagrams and photographs, and often 3D animated molecular structures.

Enjoy.

Paul W. May (2008)