HEROIC MEDICINE

In today’s world of modern pharmaceutical drugs prescribed by doctors and dispensed by chemists, it is easy to forget that plants were main orthodox medicine of the day for more than a millennium. Plant medicine was not limited to the ‘Still Room’ or the local ‘wise woman’ but was the basis of physicians’ and apothecaries’ practice until the eighteenth century and the increasing influence of chemical treatments including metals and minerals.

Moving away from the millennia-old theory of ‘humours’ during the eighteenth century, medicine continued to revolve around the idea that best medical practice involved purging, emesis and blood-letting (phlebotomy). Phlebotomy had been popular since, at least, Roman times and the Venerable Bede even wrote a treatise on blood-letting. By the eighteenth century, ‘bleeding’ a patient had become routine.

Despite the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century when empiricism (defined as knowledge through experience and observation) became respectable and acceptable*, medical practice continued to use purging, vomiting and blood-letting as their mainstay treatments. The idea that germs caused diseases did not become part of mainstream medicine until the late nineteenth century: during cholera epidemics in mid Victorian times, it was thought by most medics to be due to ‘miasmas’ in the air rather than attributed to, the then unknown concept, of a bacterium.

*In Tudor and later times, empirics were called ‘Irregulars’ or ‘Quacks’, as opposed to Regular Physicians. London Court Rolls record many of those brought before the court for practising as ‘Empiric (Quack)’ – most were women.

The name ‘heroic medicine’ was given to medicine practised at that time because of the high doses given – often requiring a truly heroic constitution to survive! However, when you look at the ingredients in many of the medicines used in those days, the term ‘heroic’ could just as easily be applied to those too. For example, the standard treatment for cholera, as advised by doctors in Newcastle in the 1853 epidemic, was:

1. Dose patient with calomel (mercury) - ½ grain every 20/30 minutes
2. Give patient a mixture of egg white, brandy and potassium nitrate – 1 to 2 teaspoonfuls every 5/10 minutes.
3. Apply mustard plasters to the stomach
4. Strap the patient to his/her bed and finally
5. After the crisis (and assuming neither the disease nor the treatment had been fatal), shave the patient’s head and apply cold poultices.

In contrast, the standard herbal (or as it had become known in some areas, medical botany) treatment required:

1. Keep the patient warm with hot herbal drinks
2. Rectal injections/enemas of Oak bark, Tormentil root, Myrrh, Bayberry root bark, Cayenne, and Ginger root.
3. Give lobelia leaf tea as an emetic
4. After the crisis, strengthen with slippery elm and arrowroot.

I think I know which treatment protocol I would prefer.

**Mercury** – A common medicine for centuries and a particular favourite treatment for those with syphilis. No-one knows how many deaths and/or disabilities this treatment caused over the centuries.

**Potassium nitrate** - Nowadays used in the production of fertilisers, rocket propellants and fireworks. Yummy.

**Mustard seed** (*Brassica alba*) **Plasters** – A poultice based on mustard seed powder and applied to the skin as a ‘counter irritant’ and which brings blood (and heat) to the area where the poultice is applied.

**Oak bark** (*Quercus rubra*); **Tormentil root** (*Potentilla erecta*); **Bayberry root bark** (*Myrica cerifera*) – these herbs are all highly astringent and thus used to treat diarrhoea.

**Myrrh resin** (*Commiphora molmol*) – used as a tincture in this case, Myrrh is a powerful anti-inflammatory and antibiotic herb.

**Cayenne fruit** (*Capsicum minimum*); **Ginger root** (*Zingiber officinalis*) – both herbs are warming (think ‘Deep Heat’!) and Cayenne has also been more recently trialled as a pain relief when applied to the skin because it numbs the nerve endings at certain dose levels. Cayenne can also cause a lot of pain as those on the receiving end of a pepper spray into the eyes can attest.

**Lobelia** (*Lobelia inflata*) – Employed in this instance as an emetic, an effect achieved at high doses of the herb. Traditionally used as expectorant and anti-asthmatic (especially when leave are smoked – just ask Marcel Proust).
As the eighteenth century progressed, chemical and mineral medicines became increasingly popular, and plant medicines developed into using ever more exotic plants from around the world, rather than native plants; Apothecaries disappeared to become doctors (but not physicians – status here was important) and their role of making up medicines evolved into chemists and druggists. Over-the-counter patent medicines became more widely available – and wilder in their claims of curing or healing too.

**Richard Lewins** sold medicines from his shop in Morpeth in the early 1820’s until mid-nineteenth century. An advert for his shop (below) and what medicines he had to sell was found in the Northumberland Archive at Woodhorn museum.

Many of the drugs advertised for sale, directly to the public in this shop, contain metals or minerals which are nowadays considered poisonous and not for human consumption; very few are common, traditional plant-based medicines such as Valerian, Lavender, Violets.

The patent medicines advertised in Richard Lewin’s bill poster are evidence of an industrialisation of popular medicine with branded products becoming more widely advertised and available in shops. Some of the products’ claims became evermore lurid. One of the first cases studied by students of contract law used to be the case of Carlill v. The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company in 1892 – one of the earliest legal cases of consumer protection and still relevant nowadays if anyone remembers the Hoover flights offer in the 1990’s. Hoover offered free flight tickets to anyone who bought over £100 of Hoover appliances. That marketing disaster cost the company over £50 million in legal costs and compensation.

The advert (right) gives the background to the claim by Mrs Carlill of the £100 reward because she used the smoke ball and then caught influenza. Mrs Carlill won her case and died 50 years later – from influenza!

But back to Richard Lewin’s shop and the products sold there....

Several medicines sold in this shop contained opium in one form or another (variously labelled as laudanum, paregoric or just plain opium). Several others contained mercury (also called calomel) and many of the medicines –patent or ‘genuine’ – were powerful minerals, chemicals or herbs that are rarely used now or are
considered more as poisons than medicines. The ingredients are certainly a testament to the heroic’ nature of people’s constitutions, given the powerful nature of many of the ingredients available over-the-counter in the shop. The guiding principle behind many of these medicines is ‘elimination’ of disease either through purging or vomiting (emesis) and they used powerful medicines for this.

Some ingredients are now well-known today as homeopathic medicines but in the 19th century it was more likely that doses of such herbs sold by Mr Lewin were at the ‘heroic’ level rather than the dilutions of homeopathy. (Homeopathy was not ‘invented’ until the early 19th century and did not become popular until mid 18th century).
Among the medicines that Richard Lewins sold in the early 1800’s were:

**Genuine Turkey Rhubarb.** As its name suggests, it contained *Rhubarb root* (*Rheum palmatum*) which is still used and readily available nowadays as a laxative. Sometimes called Chinese rhubarb, after the country from where this plant originated, it is at the more powerful end of laxatives, in a group known as ‘purgatives’.

**Compound Tincture of Rhubarb** – Used as both laxative and treatment for colic and indigestion, this would have contained *Rhubarb Root* (*Rheum palmatum*) as well as other herbs such as *Gentian root* (*Gentiana lutea*), and *Cardamom seed* (*Elletaria cardomomum*).

**Huxham’s Tincture of Bark** – a patented medicine of *Cinchona bark* (quinine), *Bitter Orange Peel*, *Serpentary Root* (*Aristolochia serpentaria*), *Saffron* (*Crocus sativa*), cochineal, all mixed with spirit. Developed by Dr John Huxham (1697-1768), to treat fevers, this is a powerful medicine especially as aristolochia-species plants are implicated in poisonings by the unwary or in adulterated ‘herbal’ products such as slimming pills bought over the internet.

**Paregoric Elixir** – *Opium* and *Camphor* in a tincture (alcohol) base. Delicious!

**Dalby’s Carminative** – Used to treat indigestion, this mixture contained tinctures of *Opium* (*Papaver somnifera*), *Asafoetida* (*Ferula asafoetida*), and *Castor* (*Ricinus communis*), with the addition of Caraway oil, Peppermint oil, spirit of wine and syrup. The caraway and peppermint would certainly help the indigestion but also help to mask the taste of Asafoetida and Castor.

**Godfrey’s Cordial** – This medicine contained *opium* (laudanum), but also flavourings of *ginger* and oil of *sassafras*, with rectified spirit of wine, syrup and *Venice Treacle* added.

**Anderson’s Scotch Pills** – A mild aperient for constipation, containing *Aloes* (*aloe barbadensis* – aloe vera), *Colocynth* (*Citrullus colocynthus* – bitter gourd) and *Gamboge* (*Garcinia hanburyii*) which is better known as a dye colour and the paint colour ‘gamboge yellow’. Another tasty medicine

**Rochelle Salts** – A laxative made of Potassium sodium tartrate (PST). PST is also used for silvering mirrors and used in electroplating – so an interesting effect as a laxative.

**Opodeldoc** – this was an embrocation liniment made from Saponaceous Balsam and used as a form of pain relief. It was, for example, prescribed by Dr William Cullen of Edinburgh in 1776 to be applied to the back of the head and neck and then covered with flannel.

**Barclay’s Antibilious Pills** – a concoction of herbs and minerals with aromatic herbs included to improve taste and reduce spasms: *Colocynth*, *Jalap* and *Guaiaicum* are all exotic herbs, *antimony* is a highly poisonous mineral, and the aromatic herbs included *Juniper*, *Rosemary* and *Caraway*. It needs a pretty strong constitution to take these pills.
Dover’s Pills/Powder – another medicine based on opium, this time with *Ipecacuanha* added. Ipecac was an herb originating in South America and was developed as a treatment encouraging sweating in cases of colds and fevers.

Welch’s Female Pills – supposedly ‘removed obstructions and other disorders’, these pills contained high quantities of iron (usually ferrous sulphate) together with *Liquorice* (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), *Turmeric* (*Curcuma longa*) and *sulphur*. Another similar treatment aimed at women was Hooper’s Pills which also contained iron but also some powerful purgative herbs such as *Senna*, *Pennyroyal* and *Aloes*.

Tincture of Guiacum – this herb originates in South America and the West Indies. One of its names is *Lignum vitae*, or ‘tree of life’. A resin from this plant became a popular treatment for chronic rheumatism and it was a common ingredient in cough medicines. Even today, several cough medicines contain an ingredient called ‘guaifenesin’ which is derived from this plant.

Tincture of Colombo – this medicine comes from an East African plant *Coccolus palmatus* (also known as *Jateorhiza palmatus*) and was used as a tonic medicine for those who were run-down.

Elixir Vitriol – a hard-to-resist mixture of sulphuric acid and alcohol with some added aromatics (ginger, cinnamon) to try to make it more palatable. It was used to encourage the appetite and as a stimulating tonic.


Jackson’s Itch Ointment – comprised Hog’s lard, palm oil, sulphur and *White hellebore* powder. The active ingredient is the white hellebore - a very powerful herb – which is so powerful that it is mainly used, if at all, in veterinary medicine nowadays.

You can see that several of the herbs and minerals appear repeatedly in these over-the-counter treatments. Controls about what could and could not be sold were much less stringent than nowadays. Incredible medical claims abounded whereas now only certain products can make medical claims – for example Turmeric and Cannabis oil sold in the shops, chemists etc cannot make medical claims and can only be sold as food supplements.