Secret remedies: revelations from the BMA

Last year saw the centenary of a book revealing the ingredients of remedies such as Pesqui’s Uranium Wine. Peter G Homan, honorary secretary of the British Society for the History of Pharmacy, describes its attempt to wipe out medicines of doubtful efficacy.

The second half of the 19th century saw a massive growth in the numbers of proprietary medicines available to the public. Massive advertising campaigns and price-cutting promotions encouraged the public to buy remedies for self-treatment. In addition, there were the sales of chemists’ nostrums, that is, items of the pharmacists’ own manufacture. The British Medical Association was not happy with the thought of self-medication for the public because it meant a possibility of diseases being undiagnosed and less revenue for doctors.

It was not a legal requirement at that time for medicines to be labelled with the ingredients unless they contained poisons such as arsenic and opium. Manufacturers used trade marks to protect the names of their medicines because this did not involve the manufacturer in disclosing either the ingredients or the method of manufacture as was necessary when applying for a patent.

Proprietary medicines were subject to duty under the Medicine Stamp Act. All products had to have a stamp attached, showing the amount of duty paid, which was dependent on the manufacturer’s retail price. For example, for up to 1/-, the duty would be 1½d per ounce and for up to 2/6, 3d. Chemists’ nostrums were not subject to government tax.

The BMA used published figures for the amounts of medicine tax received by the government to calculate how much the public paid for their medicine. In 1908 it was calculated that the public purchased just under 42 million proprietary medicines at a cost of nearly three and a quarter million pounds — medicines were big business.

In 1909, the BMA published ‘Secret remedies: what they cost and what they contain’. It was an attempt to discredit the manufacturers of proprietary medicines. In it, a number of the then current popular medicines were analysed and the ingredients costed. Costing did not include packaging and advertising. The manufacturers’ claims for cures and efficacy were reported and commented on. The BMA claimed: “Of the accuracy of the manufacturer in disclosing either the ingredients or the method of manufacture as was necessary when applying for a patent.

Some examples of featured medicines include:

- Tetelia A four-day cure for years of drink and drug taking
- Antipon “Within a day and a night of taking the first dose there will be a reduction of weight varying from 8 ounces to three pounds, in extreme cases even more.” (It contained citric acid and red colouring.)
- Clarke’s World-famed Blood Purifier This is not recommended to cure every disease but it “never fails to cure scrofula, scurvy, scrofulous sores, glandular swellings and sores, cancerous ulcers, bad legs, syphilis, piles, rheumatism, gout, dropsey, blackheads or pimples on the face, sore eyes, eruptions of the skin or blood, and skin diseases of every description.” (It contained potassium iodide, oil of gaultheria, taraxacum and glycerine, and 10 per cent was pure alcohol. The dose was a tablespoonful up to six to eight times a day.)
- Warner’s Safe Cure The leaflet states that Bright’s disease is one of the harassing complaints that physicians in family practice seldom have the patience to investigate and manage with sufficient care. (It contained potassium nitrate, oil of gaultheria, taraxacum and glycerine, and 10 per cent was pure alcohol. The dose was a tablespoonful up to six to eight times a day.)
- Singleton’s Eye Ointment Around for nearly 300 years before ‘Secret remedies’ described it, it was marketed as “an absolute specific for all eye troubles and diseases . . . also cures piles and scabrous eruptions”. (It contained red mercuric oxide.)
- Beecham’s Pills The entry quotes a circular wrapped round the box that promises a cure for no fewer than 31 medical conditions. (The pills contained aloes, ginger and soap.)

Thousands of copies of the book were sold and 1912 saw the publication of a sequel entitled ‘More secret remedies’. So what was its impact and the reaction of the public? Did the BMA win the fight against proprietary medicines? The answer as far as those medicines featured in the book are concerned, has to be yes, but it took some time. Owbridge’s cough preparation was discontinued in 1972. Singleton’s Eye Ointment was discontinued in 1974 (after having been available for nearly 400 years), Bile Beans went in the 1980s. Beecham’s Pills continued until 1997, their last active ingredient being aloin, a derivative of aloes which was the main ingredient of the original pills. Some of the trade names, such as Beecham’s and Zam-Buck, however, are still in use. So it took nearly a century to rid the world of these medicines — such is the power of advertising.