

Health in a bottle

The Department of Economic History is researching the production, retailing and consumption of proprietary medicines in England from the English Civil War to the mid-18th century. **Dr David Boyd Haycock** and **Dr Patrick Wallis** explain more.

Daffy's Elixir, Ward's Drop, James's Powders, Lockier's Pills ('Extracted from the Rays of the Sun'), Talbor's Wonderful Secret, Lady Kent's Powder, Rooke's Matchless Balsam, Godfrey's Cordial. Their inventors are now mostly long forgotten: a tiny few, such as Epsom Salts (named after the Surrey town where they were discovered), are still with us. But these were among the first brand-named, widely marketed goods available to English shoppers – and they were all medicines. They also had the potential to be hugely lucrative goods.

Anthony Daffy, for example, started in business as a London shoemaker in 1648, but by the 1670s was making a handsome living from the sale of his uncle's 'Elixir Salutis'. A pamphlet puffing its achievements boasted that this 'Choise Drink of Health' was 'Found out by the Providence of the Almighty, and (for nigh Twenty years), Experienced by my self and divers persons ... a most Excellent Preservative of Man-kind. A Secret Farr beyond any Medicament yet known'. Anthony Daffy branched out from selling medicine to trading in cotton and tobacco from Virginia and oranges from Seville, and purchasing part shares in an Atlantic trading ship. By the late 1670s he was dispatching over £1,000 of his medicine out of the capital each year (equivalent to in excess of £100,000 in terms of purchasing power in today's money). His eldest son went to Cambridge University, became a doctor, married into a wealthy family, and by 1694 was styling himself 'gentleman'.

Obviously the recipes for such medicines, if they proved commercially successful, were worth much, and could change hands for considerable sums. The utopian reformer Samuel Hartlib recorded in his diary in 1659 that a London apothecary had paid £100 sterling (the equivalent of about £9,000 today) for a 'powder or Liquor' manufactured by a man in Marlborough, which 'hath perfectly cured stone Gout Feavers and Agues ... and is sent over all the Nation'. Lionel Lockier similarly made a fortune – he is most famous today for his grand tomb in Southwark Cathedral, paid for from the profits of his pill.

Whilst Daffy and Lockier, who both lacked any formal training in medicine or chemistry, might be considered quacks, the men and women attracted to the use and manufacture of these new 'chymical medicines' came from the whole range of 17th century English society. Among them we can include Robert Boyle, leading light of the early Royal Society, and his sister, Lady Ranelagh; Robert Plot, Oxford University's professor of chemistry; Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury; and the physician and neurologist Thomas Willis. They all made or used medicines whose ingredients might include opium, mercury, antimony or copper. Taking their lead from the 16th century German physician and alchemist Paracelsus, through chemical means they sought the 'quintessence' or 'fifth element' of plants, fruits, metals and minerals, that inner, active ingredient that they believed would invigorate the healing power of nature. Paracelsus used opium mixed in raw alcohol to create laudanum, whilst Anthony Daffy steeped senna pods – a renowned laxative – in aqua vitae to create his 'elixir'. The chemist Sir Kenelm Digby favoured viper wine: made from skinned adders left to brew in madeira, it was claimed that it 'strengtheneth the Brain, Sight, and Hearing, and preserveth from Gray-hairs, [and] reneweth Youth'.

Though many of these medicines rightly seem bizarre to us today, and whilst many (though not all) of them were without any medicinal virtue, we can see in them the origins of modern pharmacy. In the 17th century alchemy and chemistry were synonymous terms, and it is notable that if we're seeking a cure for a pounding head today, we can trot down to 'Boots the Chemist' for our aspirin – a medicine whose origin lies in willow bark. It is clear that the period c1640-1720 was significant in witnessing the

broadening and deepening of commercial medicine and pharmacy as part of the wider expansion of English consumer society. These decades saw a vast increase in the population of London and the emergence of England as a major rather than peripheral European power. Indeed, economic historians have frequently used the term 'consumer revolution' to describe this period. With this growth in economic and political importance, partly based on the emergence and successful exploitation of trade markets in the New World and the development of capitalist institutions in London, there emerged in England an increasingly affluent, commercial and sophisticated domestic market for a wide range of luxury goods.

This consumer revolution was coupled with the rising demand by mid-17th century medical reformers such as Samuel Hartlib and Noah Biggs that medical practice, particularly in London, should be open to all. The cost of different types of medicines and their availability to rich and poor customers was a recurrent concern for Robert Boyle, and issues of pricing, competition, accessibility and control over the manufacture and distribution of medicine and health care are all issues of clear importance in our understanding of the early modern English medical marketplace.

Taking a less pejorative view of 'quack' culture, our research will offer a re-evaluation of proprietary medicines in this period, exploring in detail their place in English commercial culture and popular society in this period. The project will be further informed by recent developments in British economic history, which over the past two decades has seen an acceleration of research into the study both of central issues such as growth, distribution and consumption, and the interconnections between these issues, as well as narrower social, demographic and cultural themes. As our research on Anthony Daffy's later 17th century London business in 'Elixir Salutis' has already revealed, the development of medicine in this period must be seen to have been as much about business as it was about health. ■



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Dr Wallis is a lecturer and Dr Haycock a research officer in the Economic History Department. Dr Haycock's three-year project on the trade in proprietary medicines and the emerging medical marketplace in England is funded by the Wellcome Trust. *Quackery and Commerce in 17th-century London: the proprietary medicine business of Anthony Daffy*, edited by Patrick Wallis and David Haycock, was published in December 2005 as supplement 25 in the Wellcome Trust's journal series *Medical History*. See www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economichistory