

Past attitudes to women in pharmacy

Through a collage put together from the pages of the pharmaceutical press and archival material held by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, **Briony Hudson** provides an insight to the attitudes that women pharmacists faced from 1872 to 1948

In the 1870s, both sides of the debate about electing women to membership of the Pharmaceutical Society were strongly expressed through verse and prose in *The Pharmaceutical Journal*.

I could not bear to see their hands as soft as alabaster
 Begrimed all o'er with dirty pill and nasty smelling plaster
 Oh! May I never see them with their chignons in confusion
 Attempt to shake the tinctures or prepare the cold infusion.
 How could they climb the shaky steps to clean the bottles dusty,
 Or go below amongst the wets into the cellar musty?
 Their sleek round arms were never made to work the iron mortar,
 But some opine they might assist to cut the salary shorter. — *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 1 March 1873.

What I wish to impress upon those who are interested in the subject is the extreme folly of taking away any remaining barriers to the entry of a profession for which ladies are by their sex eminently disqualified. . . . There is a considerable amount of drudgery connected with [the profession], which must be repugnant to ladies, and which I should seriously be disposed to think their constitution would

not be adapted to endure. . . . There are many cases brought to the notice of an ordinary chemist which would be exceedingly undesirable to bring her in contact with. — **Charles Fryer, of Scarborough, in a letter to *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 17 November 1877.**

A "Royal charter" you've obtained, and published certain rules
 But none of these, I think, excludes the women from our schools.
 If they obey the law laid down, we cannot keep them out,
 And, O! they're wide awake enough to know what they're about. — **A Valentine to the Council of the Pharmaceutical Society, *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 22 February 1873.**

It was part of the executive duty of the Council to elect all eligible persons, irrespective of their sex. It would be as reasonable to ask what church they attended as to inquire as to the sex of eligible persons who applied for admission [to the Society's membership], and he hoped the matter would now be settled. — **Robert Hampson's contribution to the Council meeting of 1 October 1879, *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 4 October 1879.**

Early 20th century attitudes

In 1905, the year of the foundation of the Association of Women Pharmacists, education was argued as a vital part of a prospective pharmacist's progress, for both men and women. Married women were expected not to work and women pharmacists were expected to choose the location of their work carefully.

It is needful to make it clear that dispensing is not a profession for the girl who is very badly off and is unable to command time and money for a three years' training. . . . A thoroughly good education (including a knowledge of Latin) is also necessary. . . . In short, it is a profession for the girl who could do well in the London Matriculation examination, but not for the girl who has barely "satisfied the examiners" in the Cambridge Junior Locals. — ***The Queen*, 30 December 1905.**

If improved education is to result in the neglect of the family and home it can only lead to disaster. There is, however, no evidence that there is any connection between education and neglect of the home, and women should show by their conduct that such suspicion is not justified. . . . I want the time to come when every girl will say not "Need I work?" but "What work shall I do?" — **Louise**



Chemist and Druggist, 29 July 1916

What to wear?

The idea of a practical woman wearing a "long white drill coat" in the pharmacy is rather worse than absurd. What chemist is prepared to pay £7 10s (this is a real estimate) for one dozen such coats before commencing her duties, and 4s to 6s per week for laundry on coats only? . . . Wherein lies the necessity of distinguishing by dress the woman pharmacist from the "sales girl in the toilet department of a drug store"? Both women are earning their living in an honourable manner, and to some extent their duties coincide. Surely if the woman pharmacist is superior, she will show it by her manner and training without any special dress advertisement. — **Response from Nellie Patterson to a letter suggesting women pharmacists should wear long white drill coats to make them appear professional and distinguish them from sales girls. *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 16 February 1915.**

Museum exhibition



To coincide with the National Association of Women Pharmacists' centenary celebrations, the museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has launched a new temporary exhibition. The display, at the Society's headquarters, traces the history of women in pharmacy and the history of NAWP. It includes portraits of two women pharmacists, Elsie Hooper and Vera Lord, that the museum has recently acquired.

In addition, an online exhibition about the history of women in pharmacy will be added to the Society's website later in the year. This will include an overview of the milestones of women's progress in pharmacy, alongside brief biographies of some of the individuals involved.

Briony Hudson is the keeper of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum collections

Equal work, equal pay?

Equality at its root also had to mean economic equality. The National Association of Women Pharmacists was involved in national movements for equal pay. The association's annual report of 1943 noted "a definite improvement in salaries but discrimination is still made between those paid to qualified men and women doing similar work". In 1944, the association's executive committee submitted a report to the Royal Commission investigating the issue. The report noted that although 55 per cent of women pharmacists worked in retail pharmacy, few held managerial positions due to prejudice against having a woman in control of a predominantly male staff. However, of the 20 per cent of women pharmacists holding hospital appointments, there were a number of well-established chief pharmacists. The number of women in wholesale and manufacturing pharmacy had increased during the war, although there were few travelling representatives.

Having also examined pharmacy education, civil servants, Pharmaceutical Society inspectors and those in the forces, the report concluded that men and women pharmacists were engaged on the same work throughout almost the entire field of pharmacy. However, according to a report on the national scale of minimum wages, published by the Joint Industrial Council for Retail Pharmacy, wages for women in retail pharmacy were 10 shillings per week less than men in all cases. The association's report described this as "deplorable in its discrimination against women pharmacists", and noted that there were no female members of the Joint Industrial Council. Most hospital, wholesale, manufacturing and education posts paid men and women equally.

The association's report argued that the current objections to equal pay rested on false premises — women were certainly capable of leaving the family home and carrying out work without endangering the social life of the nation. Paying women and men equally would reinforce the principle that pharmacists should be employed on merit rather than viewing women as cheap labour — if women received equal pay, they would be equally able to make the same financial provision for their dependants as men.

Creighton, speaking at the first public meeting of the Association of Women Pharmacists. *Chemist and Druggist*, 21 October 1905.

Where to settle! . . . The woman pharmacist has something else to weigh besides expense: it is the question of her sex, and the fact that at present she is a pioneer in her profession, and must naturally turn to where she thinks an enterprising woman will be respected and her ability made use of rather than to a locality that appears very "Early Victorian" . . . The places to avoid are centres, such as cathedral towns, where anything new is looked upon with suspicion, and must stand the test of time before it can be trusted." — **E. L. B. Forster. *The ideal neighbourhood***

for the woman pharmacist. *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 12 August 1916.

War-related attitudes

As in many other fields of work, the opportunities for women in pharmacy increased dramatically during times of war. But the increased presence of women in the early 1920s, as a result of the 1914–18 war, prompted some vehement objections. During the 1939–45 war, the Ministry of Labour and National Service issued instructions that women pharmacists and dispensers were not to be called up. Mary Islip, employment secretary for the National Association of Women Pharmacists asked that "married and retired women who could return to pharmacy during the present emergency should do so as soon as possible". — ***The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 18 April 1942.**

To say that only now women are coming to the forefront in usefulness sounds like the sudden awakening of a slumberer to economic consciousness. They have for a long time played in most large pharmacies a great and successful part, and the abnormal demand arising, as it naturally does in war time, does so in the first instance principally because they have been ready and eager and fit to step into the breach. — **Letter from M. P. S. *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 3 January 1916.**

It is easy to understand that men, and especially unemployed ex-service men, in the drug trade should object to female competition, chiefly on the ground that competition tends to depress the wage standard. . . . There is no more reason for excluding women from earning a livelihood in pharmacy than there is for excluding men who are less than 5 ft. 4 in. in height. . . . let marriage be the gilding of a full life, not the end and object of an empty one. Even now the happiest marriages are those in which each partner works for the common home — a ménage not unknown in pharmacy — and we are emboldened to hope that the problem of women in pharmacy may in the future be largely solved on these lines. — **Letter from "A free woman". *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 13 November 1920.**

While there are so many male chemists and chemists' assistants unemployed at the present time, it seems the limit of absurdity to flood the business, or profession, with a motley horde of untrained and incompetent surplus females. Is it not practicable to eliminate this undesirable element altogether? — **Letter from "A Pharmacist". *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 11 March 1922.** This outburst prompted 21 letters in response, from men and women, all expressing horror at this attitude.

This is a matter to which women in pharmacy should give special attention. . . . The civil population in any war consists largely of

A woman's place

In spite of increasing numbers of women working in pharmacy and their more varied and responsible roles, some areas seemed to be regarded as a woman's remit remained.

We must remember that today the public is deeply concerned with health and beauty and it is to the pharmacy that people and especially women turn for aid in this direction. . . . I know that a well-known store had a special advertisement of their boxes in the Christmas brochure. They are metal cases, fitted with empty bottles for lotions and boxes for powders and creams. The recipients of these will, of course, want the containers filled. I suggest that the woman chemist is the person best fitted to suggest what should be put in these bottles. — ***The British and Colonial Pharmacist*, January 1935.**

Perhaps the most fascinating exhibit from the woman's point of view were the synthetic resin sponges, which were hard when dry but became soft when placed in water. They were made in four sizes, bath, toilet, baby and cosmetic, and in attractive shades of pink, green, blue and yellow. These sponges can be sterilised — a property which would recommend them for hospital use. — **Chemists' exhibition at Central Hall, Westminster. *The British and Colonial Pharmacist*. October 1948.**

This exhibition is always of particular interest to women whatever their walk in life may be, and it is not unreasonable to say that for women pharmacists it is of two-fold importance. All labour-saving devices are examined from the domestic point of view, as well as from the pharmaceutical angle. — **Ideal Home Exhibition. *The British and Colonial Pharmacist*, April 1948.**

women and children; the men, of course, are with the colours. . . . All women pharmacists should attend the meeting on December 1 and learn all there is to know about defence against gas, in particular what steps are being taken to protect the civil population and what part women, with the specialist knowledge of the pharmacist, can play in any defence scheme. — **Announcement of a meeting organised by the Pharmaceutical Society entitled "The Defence of the Civil Population Against Gas". *The Woman Pharmacist's page in The British and Colonial Pharmacist*, November 1936.**

It is interesting to note the South-East London Chemists' Association has decided to arrange a course, in collaboration with the Red Cross Society, for "first aid to air raid casualties". This should receive the support of women pharmacist members of the association, as in the eventuality of such a service being actually used it might be found that many men would be called to military service. — ***The British and Colonial Pharmacist*, April 1937.**