

Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

Pharmacopoeia Londinensis 1618 (the London pharmacopoeia)

The project to produce a pharmacopoeia for all London apothecaries was first raised by the Royal College of Physicians in 1585. Although there are further occasional references to it in the archives of the Royal College it is not until 1614 that progress appeared to have been made and, by 1617 the pharmacopoeia was "on the point of completion".

The *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* appeared on 7 May 1618 with a dedication by the royal physician Sir Theodore Turguet de Mayerne and a preface that refers to the work as a formulary for the citizens of London. However, it was a Royal Proclamation that led to it becoming recognised as Europe's first national pharmacopoeia. The proclamation declared the pharmacopoeia to apply to "all and singular apothecaries of this our Realme of England or the dominions thereof".

The pharmacopoeia contains 712 compound remedies arranged by class into waters, ointments, lozenges, etc. At the rear there is a list of 680 crude drugs used in these remedies. The list of crude drugs is arranged by origin into plants (roots, leaves, etc), animals and animal parts, salts and metals. The sources for the formulae in the pharmacopoeia were varied and included Galen and Avicenna as well as members of the Royal College including Turguet de Mayerne.

Despite the claim on publication that the pharmacopoeia was "now perfected" it was withdrawn within a few months. The official reason given by the Royal



Frontispiece of the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* in the Society's collection

Society of Physicians was that it had been produced without authorisation by an over eager printer. This explanation has been challenged by historians ever since and comparison of the May edition with the December replacement seems to suggest more fundamental changes than just to correct a printer's error.

The replacement for the withdrawn May 1618 edition appeared in December

of the same year. The new edition contained 963 compound remedies compared to 712 in the earlier version and 1,190 crude drugs instead of the 680 in May. In addition the list of crude drugs was moved from the back to the front.

This, in addition to other changes, has led some historians to argue that the two versions are fundamentally different and that the withdrawal of the May edition was not down solely to an over enthusiastic printer. Indeed one historian, the American George Urdang, has gone as far as to argue that the changes between the May and December versions were the result of a power struggle within the Royal College with the younger members gaining the upper hand. Another suggestion is that the earlier version was rushed out to help with trade protection. Whatever the truth, the December version is regarded as the true "first" edition and, as Melvin Earles says, is "the basis for the official English materia medica until the reforms of the 18th century".

The frontispiece shown here is from the December 1618 edition held in the Society's library.

The library holds over 60,000 books. Many such as this treasure cover the origins of pharmacy. A contemporary collection covers all aspects of pharmacy, pharmacy practice, and related subjects. The collection can be searched on the online catalogue (<http://olib.rpsgb.org.uk>) and many items are available for loan to members.