

Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

Poison antidote case by Burroughs, Wellcome & Co

The *Chemist & Druggist* Diary of 1900 carried an advertisement for “drug outfits” by Burroughs, Wellcome & Co, Manufacturing Chemists of Snow Hill Buildings, London. The “drug outfits” in question featured medicine chests for medical men, travellers, missionaries and others going to all parts of the world.

Among the medicine chests was a “poison antidote case”, which would have been of particular interest to medical practitioners in Britain at the time, in view of the number of cases of malicious poisoning which occurred in the later 19th century.

The poison antidote case consists of a wooden box, measuring 77mm x 310mm x 155mm, with a hinged lid and metal handle. On the upper surface of the lid are the words “Antidote Case” painted in red capitals, while the facing edge has “Tabloid Brand, Trade Mark”.

(The Tabloid trademark was registered by Wellcome in 1884, initially to describe the company's compressed pill formulations, but it was later also applied to other products such as medicine chests.)

The case contains 21 half ounce, cork stopped vials divided between the lower layer of the box and an upper removable tray. Attached to the outside of each vial is a paper label detailing the contents and instructions for its antidote use.

There are also 10 small cork stopped tubes containing hypodermic tablets. These are also labelled but only with their contents (eg, atropine sulphate 1/60 grain, curare 1/12 grain). The vials contain either tablets (eg, potassium permanganate 2 grains), finely divided crystals (eg, Glauber's salt) or liquid (eg, ether, castor oil).

Also present is a cardboard tube of prepared chalk and a 1cc glass and metal syringe.

The original advertisement includes a stomach siphon tube and a catheter among the contents of the antidote case, but both these items are missing from the museum's example.

With the case there is a “toxicological chart”, which is a comprehensive list of poisonous substances and antidote procedures against them. The listed antidotes are more elaborate and detailed than those on the outside of each vial. It is possible that these latter directions were intended where emergency use of the vial contents was required as an interim step towards recovery.

In England and Wales, in the 60 years between 1851 and 1911, there were several trials for murder by poisoning, most of which concluded with the execution of the poisoner. The murderers were able to obtain the poisons from various sources, some of which were quite legitimate. The Pharmacy Act of 1868 restricted the holding and supply of named poisons to the chemist and druggist. This was far more stringent in its scope than the Arsenic Act of 1851 which applied only to the supply of arsenic, which before that date had been freely available.

Despite the stricter legislation five people were tried for arsenic poisoning within the period stated. They included three accused in the Bradford poisonings of 1858 who at the end of their trial were discharged, the jury accepting that the poisonings were not deliberate.

In the case of Mr Seddon (1911), who was accused of poisoning a Miss Barrow (his wealthy lodger), he obtained the arsenic as an aqueous extract from arsenic-containing fly papers which were lawfully obtained from a chemist.

Mrs Maybrick, who poisoned her husband with arsenic (1889, Liverpool) is believed to have obtained her arsenic from a



The poison antidote case and its removable tray of vials

chemist, though this was not revealed at the time of the trial. She was sentenced to imprisonment rather than facing the gallows as the judge raised the factor that her husband was thought to have been an “arsenic-eater”.

There were four instances of the use of antimony in poisoning. Three of these were known to be in the form of tartar emetic (antimony potassium tartrate), which was administered to the series of wives of Mr Chapman (1897, 1901, 1902) in small doses over an extended period. The notorious Dr Crippen (1910) murdered his wife by poisoning with hyoscine hydrobromide; this substance being discovered by forensic examination of the exhumed body.

Poisons used by others who were tried during the period were strychnine, aqueous extract of colchicum seeds, aconitine and prussic acid (cyanide).

All the above poisons appeared in the toxicological chart accompanying the antidote case. It would have been vital that the nature of the poison taken was known and the recipient seen in time by a medical practitioner to be given the appropriate antidote.

Showcases

Two portable showcases holding pharmacy items from the 19th and early 20th centuries are available on loan from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum for display at sites such as community pharmacies, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, local museums, libraries, schools and other education centres.

One case is themed around the art of Victorian dispensing and includes a pill mortar, pill machine, pill rounders and silverers, powder folders and suppository moulds. The other case has a Victorian ceramic inhaler, a group of medicine and poison bottles, rectal ointment introducers and a range of 19th and early 20th century medicines.

Each case consists of a clear Perspex display unit on a waist-high plinth. The objects are permanently secured to the base of the sealed unit. For transit,

the plinth becomes a protective case. Packed for transit, the cases are 75cm x 60cm x 90cm high. Each weighs about 40kg.

The cases may be borrowed singly or as a pair. The standard loan period is one month, but longer periods can sometimes be arranged. Borrowers may collect the cases, or the museum can arrange delivery at cost. Loan attracts a small administration fee, and borrowers must meet certain conditions as regards security during use and transit.

Further information about the showcases can be obtained from the Museum Office, Royal Pharmaceutical Society, 1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN (tel 020 7572 2210; fax 020 7572 2499; e-mail museum@rpsgb.org) Information is also available from the museum section of the Society's website (www.rpsgb.org/museum).