

Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

An early 18th century storage jar for tobacco

At 6am on 1 July, a ban on the smoking of tobacco in enclosed public spaces and workplaces will be introduced in England, following the example already set in the rest of the UK. With the harmful effects of tobacco now so well recognised, it may come as a surprise to learn that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum collections include a tin-glazed earthenware storage jar for tobacco, currently on display in the museum's "Healing science" exhibition.

At 26cm high, labelled "HAVANA", the impressive brass-lidded jar certainly catches the viewer's attention. But what is a Dutch container for Cuban tobacco doing in a display about pharmacy history?

The jar dates from the 1700s, the height of Dutch colonial power. From the second half of the 1600s, the Netherlands was a major player in the tobacco trade, having first come into contact with it through commercial dealings with the English. Across their vast empire, Dutch traders exchanged tobacco for food, ivory, silk, spices and even slaves. In fact, the Dutch government acquired the Cape of Good Hope in exchange for tobacco and brandy in 1652. Recreational smoking of tobacco in a pipe became a national trend, commonly portrayed in Dutch paintings of the time.

When Christopher Columbus first landed in Cuba in November 1492, he wrote in his diary: "Men and women were crossing to their villages, the men with half-burned wood in their hands and certain herbs in order to take their smokes, which are dry herbs put in a certain leaf, also dry, in the manner of a musket made of paper; and having lighted one part of it, by the other they suck the smoke inside with the breathe by which they become benumbed and almost drunk."

Although Columbus's observation is of recreational enjoyment of tobacco, Europeans quickly tried it for its native American medicinal uses. Between 1537 and 1559, at least 14 books mentioning medicinal tobacco appeared in Europe, published in Dutch, English, French, Italian, Latin, Portuguese and Spanish. In 1553, Rembert Dodoens, a physician in Antwerp, published the first herbal to include a woodcut illustration of the plant.

The French ambassador to Portugal, Jean Nicot, took an imported plant to Paris, claiming that sniffing powdered tobacco would cure ulcers, headaches and asthma. Columbus had recorded locals sniffing tobacco powder in America on his second voyage in 1493. Nicot's subsequent experiments on tobacco's medicinal uses and his recorded case histories led to the plant being called "Nicotiane" in his honour as early as 1565.

Another leading figure in the introduction of American drugs into Europe was a Spanish physician, Nicolas Monardes. He published his first book on American medicines in 1569. An English version, entitled 'Joyfull news out of the new founde worlde', was published in 1577. Monardes claimed that the Spanish had brought tobacco to Europe originally as an ornamental flower. However, by the time he published his book, it was being used as a hot and dry remedy to remove the cold humours that caused shortness of breath, kidney stones and stomach

ache. It also expelled intestinal worms, and could be applied externally for joint pains and toothache.

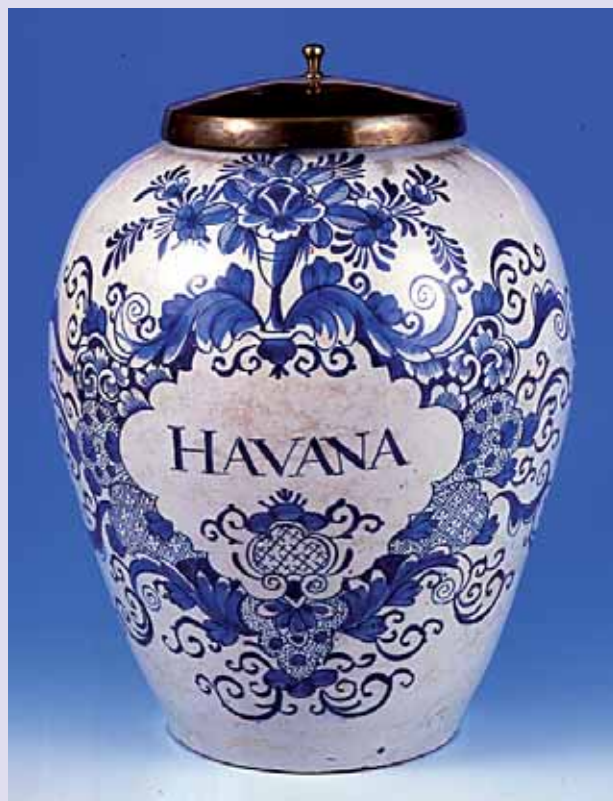
In England, Nicholas Culpeper based his description of tobacco in his 'Complete English Herbal' of 1653 on Monardes's text: "Neither is there any better salve in the world for wounds than may be made of it, for it cleanseth, fetcheth out the filth though it lie in the bones, brings up the flesh from the bottom [of the wound], and all this it doth speedily, it cures wounds made with poisoned weapons. . . . Taken in a pipe it hath almost as many virtues, it easeth weariness, takes away the sence of hunger and thirst, provokes to stool, easeth the body of superfluous humors, opens stoppings."

However, tobacco's primary use was as a recreational drug. It had been popular in the court of Elizabeth I, but James I raged against its evil effects in his 'A counterblaste to tobacco' in 1604. He denied that it had any medicinal properties and claimed that autopsies performed on smokers revealed their internal organs were covered with soot. He also objected to English subjects using a remedy that the "barbarous Indians" were using to treat themselves for syphilis "so corrupted and execrable a malady". James also opposed the use of tobacco for pleasure and the amount of money spent on it by dandies. England prohibited its cultivation in 1660. But the settlers in Virginia and its English importers grew rich as it maintained its fashionable status.

Medicinal uses continued. From its original recording by Columbus in 1492 until its decline in medicinal use in the 1860s, tobacco was employed externally and internally, in the form of ashes, balms, decoctions, fumes, juice, leaves, lotions, oils, ointments, plasters, poultices and snuff. It was introduced into the ears, eyes, mouth, nose, lungs, stomach and teeth and was indicated for an immense range of conditions from abdominal pains to wounds, and from hair loss to tetanus.

Tobacco was also recommended to resuscitate drowned people. Tobacco smoke was blown into the rectum of the "apparently drowned" to provide warmth and stimulation. Tobacco resuscitation kits consisting of a pair of bellows and a tube were provided by the Royal Humane Society of London (founded in 1774 as the Society for the Recovery of the Apparently Drowned) and placed at various points along the Thames.

However, tobacco's harmful effects were also noted from Columbus's observation of the native American's decayed teeth onwards. There was no



The museum's Dutch earthenware tobacco jar

scientific understanding of its composition until the early 19th century, with French chemist Louis Nicholas Vauquelin discovering the active principle of tobacco, which he called nicotianine, in 1809, and Wilhelm Heinrich Posselt and Karl Ludwig Reimann finally isolating nicotine in 1828. Their analysis revealed the presence of a poisonous substance in tobacco but, in spite of growing concerns and vocal campaigns from the second half of the 1800s onwards, its recreational use increased while its medicinal use declined.

In Britain, it took until 1962 for the publication of a report explaining that smokers were exposing themselves to high risks of serious disease. The Royal College of Physicians report on "Smoking and health" led to an immediate ban on television advertising of cigarettes that associated tobacco with happiness, virility, love or adventure. All television advertising of cigarettes was banned in 1965.

However, it was still possible to buy tobacco in the form of cigarettes in many British pharmacies. In April 1981, the Society's Ethics Committee advised the Council that it would not be possible to enforce a ban on the sale of tobacco and cigarettes in pharmacies because of the doctrine of the restraint of trade. However, the Council promoted the view that the sale of these products in pharmacies was undesirable. It was not until the Code of Ethics and Standards of 2001 that tobacco products were specifically mentioned in the guidance that "pharmacists must not purchase for sale on registered pharmacy premises, any product which may be injurious to public health or bring the public into disrepute".