

# Some cautionary tales for Christmas — there but for the grace of God . . .

*Recently we asked readers to write to us with their worst pharmacy experiences. Our selection below will, we hope, amuse, illuminate or relieve readers*

## Upstairs, downstairs — a pharmacy time trial

For a period when I was a young man I managed a small pharmacy in Derbyshire. My employer was a pharmacist-optician who had practices in several towns in the area, and used to spend a couple of days a week at the branch that I managed. In those days retail pharmacy, as it was known, was a more leisurely occupation than it is today, and there were occasions when all our work was finished and time hung heavily on our hands. Rather than waste time improving our minds, reading or knitting we instituted a trial of physical ability.

One of my assistants was a pretty, but statuesque, blonde while I was five feet two inches tall and weighed less than eight stone. One day when the boss was elsewhere she offered to give me a piggy-back up the stairs that ran along one wall of the shop and led to a first floor storeroom. She accomplished this without any great effort, and from this simple beginning it developed into a trial against the clock. She had to carry me on her back up the stairs from the shop, round the storeroom, through the boss's office, across the landing, up the attic stairs, round the two attics and down the stairs back to the shop while one of the other girls timed us. Few customers arrived when the trials were being run, and those who did just accepted it as one of my eccentricities.

One day a record time looked possible but, unfortunately, our boss had decided to pick up some papers from his office and arrived without warning at the bottom of the shop stairs just as we started our descent from the storeroom. To say that he was startled is an understatement, and he did not seem to be very pleased. He calmed down when he learnt that we had not actually opened a book, and he could not have

obtained a bet on the result even if he had arrived before we started.

After this the trials were abandoned, to the disappointment of some of our younger customers, and, although we thought deeply about the matter, we never found a suitable substitute for it.

The financial rewards for a career in pharmacy are much greater nowadays, but I sometimes wonder whether it is as much fun as it used to be.

*W. A. Jackson  
Manchester*

## The case of the disappearing Santa Clauses

Some years ago, I was working for Boots in one of its south coast branches. As the Christmas season approached, the show material started to arrive. That year the company had really pushed the boat out, and the quality of material was far superior to that in previous years. It included a number of rather cute, life size (presumably!), cardboard cut out Santa Clauses. Within minutes, all of them had been "claimed" by various members of staff.

Come closing time on Christmas Eve, all the lucky ones traipsed out of the store with their Santas tucked under their arms. It was some sight, although I had great difficulty persuading the bus driver that charging me a half fare for my Santa was not really in the spirit of Christmas.

Returning to work on 27 December, we opened the post from head office. The first envelope contained a memo — "Take down Santas and store carefully. They will be required for next year."

*David Moore  
Isle of Wight*

## You say "tomaito", I say "tomahito"!

When I was a newly qualified pharmacist I worked for a time in a rather smart pharmacy in the St James's area of London. Such was the pharmacy's location that it was often used by tourists and other visitors to the West End.

One day, a large American woman approached me at the counter and asked, I thought, if we had a Dutch cap. I retrieved one from the dispensary and, trying to be discreet, I proffered it to her. "Good grief," she exclaimed, loudly. "I shall never get that on my head!"

Only then did I realise she wanted a shower hat — or a douche cap in American parlance!

*Graeme Smith  
London SE8*

## An unforgettable Christmas party

During my early years in pharmacy I worked for a large multiple. Much of the stock was supplied in bulk and had to be transferred into black-painted tin drawers, a job allocated to the porters, who also weighed out the stock at the request of shop floor staff at the time of sale.

We sold flake boracic, which was used as a ballroom floor polish, and flake naphthalene for use as a moth deterrent.

Yes. You've guessed it. The wrong item was sold one day.

The error came to light after a report from an unforgettable Christmas party describing the dancers' eyes and noses streaming all evening from the effects of naphthalene fumes.

*J. M. Pickwick  
Cheadle,  
Cheshire*

## Useful after all

We have always given what we thought was a comprehensive service from my pharmacy for many years. This included opening sometime every day as there was no other pharmacy close and in this area not every household had even one car. We worked these duties into our lifestyle and our families accepted it.

We were always busy up to Christmas Day with extra prescriptions because people behave over bank holidays as if they do not expect the doctor's surgery ever to open again. Even though there were notices up we were often asked when we would be open over the holiday period.

One year the sparse trade on Christmas Day was as usual: batteries missing from toys and desperate gifts to keep someone happy. As several members of local families had asked me in the lead up to the big day about my opening hours, I expected at least one customer. But when one came in and bought bicarb to cook the cabbage I felt that my time was really being wasted.

As I was closing, a doctor from an adjacent practice telephoned: "Did I have an oxygen set available." "Yes." "Sorry it is outside your patch but could you make a delivery now?" I did and set it up. Then I went home for my Christmas dinner thinking that perhaps pharmacists have a use after all.

*Peter Jenkins  
Cardiff*

## My worst pharmacy day

The day started well enough — nice weather and an early start. Usual journey up the A1, join the A414, to the M10, then M1, to the A5.

Over the mind-boggling double roundabout at Dunstable and up through Hockliffe passing some beautiful old buildings and finally into Wretchley. Working for the Barclays group.

Parked the car outside the pub, which seemed to be one of the few places not vandalised on this rather run down estate, probably because it was owned by an ex-wrestler who, despite new hips, was still able to flat-ten any opposition!

Entered the precinct (Black Adder Court), avoiding the freshly laid, and not so fresh, doggy parcels, to be surrounded by armed police with helicopter buzzing overhead.

"Been a murder here Guv. We're carrying out our enquiries."

Oh dear.

Anyway, busy day as usual. The senior (18 years old) was having a well earned day off so no help for me and controlled panic in the shop. Tried not to worry about the absence of any hot water (the electrician seemed to think the water heater would work without any electrical connection!) or the black fungus creeping up the wall due to resident upstairs liking his bath to be particularly full.

Lots of kids from the local school coming in all day and deciding which and how much stock to transfer to their greasy hands. After a day of this, started to become a little tetchy and commenced throwing out procedure (a big mistake).

One delightful young lady cracked me around the head and threw a load of lipsticks at me as she left the shop only to return later with a gang of friends, hangers on, minders and assorted heavies. So I phoned the Bill.

"Sorry Guv. We've got a murder inquiry here, can't spare anybody, too busy. They'll probably go away". Thank goodness, they did.

Finally closed up and made it safely back to the car. Never been so pleased to hear the old Volvo start first time but was surprised at the fog which seemed to follow me down the A5. While at the lights in Hockliffe I noticed that the fog was only enveloping my car so I opened the door, only to see the "fog" rising up from underneath the car.

Pulled into an abandoned garage opened the bonnet to see oil and smoke everywhere.

Fortunately, son was available for a long tow home, arriving around 10.30.

Wife opened door: "You're late!"

It's a funny old world.

*Malcolm Stein  
Hatfield, Hertfordshire*

## What am I? A pharmacist — or a heating engineer?

Leicester General Hospital, where I was Chief pharmacist from 1970 to 1989, was built at the turn of the 20th century and developed considerably after 1974 as the medical school was established. Towards the end of the 1970s I was offered the old maternity ward as a pharmacy store following the building of a new maternity unit. Although it was on the first floor and a long way from the pharmacy, it was much better than the damp basement and dilapidated wooden hut that currently stored medicines. The old labour ward was fitted out with metal shelves and became the "tablet" store, while the empty ward space held substantial volumes of sterile fluids.

Labour wards have to be kept constantly warm and so I asked for the heating to be turned off to provide a more suitable environment for medicines. The orthopaedic theatre beneath us on the ground floor was unaffected by this change.

All went well until I got a call in the early hours of the coldest night of the year to come to the hospital urgently. I arrived to find that a water pipe in the roof space had burst and water was pouring through the ceiling on to the medicines. It felt strange to be examining the scene in a waterproof jacket and beneath an umbrella. We commanded theatre boots and cleaners' machines

and, disregarding the dangers of mixing electricity and water, spent the next couple of hours sucking up water.

Fortunately, few drugs were lost. The metal shelving had protected packs from a direct soaking. This was still in the days when tablets were delivered in bulk and, although the cardboard outers were wet, the plastic or glass bottles protected the contents. The intravenous fluid cartons were all soaked, but the bags within them were useable.

The news from the ground floor was not so good: artificial hip joints valued at £35,000 were to be written off.

The cause had been my request to turn off the labour ward heating. A constant supply of convected warmth had kept the unlagged water pipes in the roof space from freezing. Shutting off the heat, coupled with the extreme conditions, had allowed the water to freeze and expand, thereby springing the joints. A thaw, combined with substantial water pressure, had resulted in the flood.

It would seem that chief pharmacists need also to be heating engineers and think about the hidden dangers in Victorian buildings.

*Ian Bell  
Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland*

## Never volunteer!

In 1943 I was a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps and working in the medical stores at the Cambridge Hospital in Aldershot.

One day a request came from the dispensary for a supply of gentian violet pills, not a standard medication. Filled with zeal I said that I was prepared to make them. A little research showed that these would have to be enteric coated. No problem for a newly qualified pharmacist who remembered that the method was to coat the pills in a gelatin solution and then immerse them in formaldehyde solution for 10 minutes.

And so to work. A pill mass was made, rolled out on a pill machine, causing some violet stained fingers on the way. They were rounded, impaled on pins and dipped in a gelatine solution and laid out on a wire gauze to dry. Then the last step — to take them off the pins and immerse them in the formaldehyde solution. But what is happening? The solution is turning violet, and a crestfallen pharmacist realises that he has forgotten to put a dab of gelatine solution where the pin had stuck in the pill.

A second batch was prepared satisfactorily. Whether or not they were effective I never found out, but I learnt a useful lesson in preparing enteric coated pills — and also never to volunteer for anything.

*Alan Kendall  
Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland*