

Casting spells and dispensing magic in 20th century British pharmacy

In this article **Stuart Anderson** describes some magical activities with which, until surprisingly recently, community pharmacists were involved



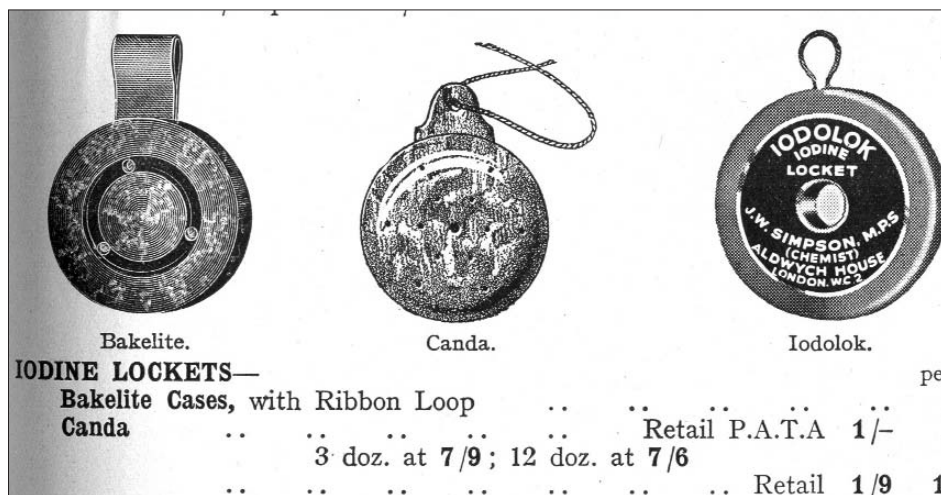
The role of magic and sorcery in pharmacy in earlier centuries has been extensively documented but in the 21st century, when people have access to endless information about health, illness and medicines on the internet, it would be difficult to find many examples of magic in pharmacy practice. At some point, usually considered to be before the start of the 20th century, such practices died out, but the recollections of retired community pharmacists (held in the National Life Stories Collection in the British Library's National Sound Archive and reported in a variety of contemporary publications) contain a surprising range of magical and other non-scientific activities, many of which continued well into the second half of the 20th century. In some places the role of the community pharmacist even extended to the casting of spells, and requests to perform conjuring tricks were not unknown.

Wart charming

There are probably few conditions for which innumerable cures have been suggested than warts. One of the more frequently cited is the stealing of a piece of meat from a butcher's stall or basket, burying it secretly at a gateway where four lanes meet, and then waiting. As the meat decays so the warts will wither away. An equally effective remedy was to cut an apple into slices, rub them on the warts, and then bury the pieces, as was rubbing a snail on the warts, impaling it on a thorn and leaving it to die.

No doubt these and many other practices survived well into the 20th century. But occasionally the services of the community pharmacist were called upon. As a newly qualified pharmacist Enid Lucas-Smith worked in a pharmacy in Twickenham, Middlesex, in the late 1930s. She recalls:

We did a stupid thing that you will laugh about now, but we charmed warts. When the boss first told me, he said "here's a man who wants his warts charmed". I thought "warts charmed? In a pharmacy?" I'd probably only been there a few days. He said "yes, I'll show you how to do it". So he took a little dog-eared book out of his drawer under the dispensary bench and he said "come with me out of earshot of the patient". He said "you have to fill in the date, the patient's name, and you have to ask them for the number of warts they've got. If they don't know I tell them to go away and count them roughly, and come in again tomorrow". So I said "what then?" He said "that's all, you can put the book away now". And of course, so often, this worked, because most warts will go if you don't do anything about them.



Bakelite.	Canda.	Iodolok.	
IODINE LOCKETS—			
Bakelite Cases, with Ribbon Loop	Retail P.A.T.A 1/—
Canda Retail 1/9 1
	3 doz. at 7/9; 12 doz. at 7/6		

Iodine lockets in Butler and Crispe's catalogue, 1939

So I asked "what happens if the patient comes back and the warts haven't gone?" So he said "it's all right. We'll just have to do it again". And he went through the whole rigmarole again. It was one of those things we just couldn't give up, and I went on charming warts for another nine months.

How long the wart charming continued after that is not clear, but other pharmacists elsewhere reported performing similar rituals, and at one time it must have been a common activity in many community pharmacies.

Dragon's blood and quicksilver

Two products that had an unusually brisk sale from pharmacies in certain parts of the country were dragon's blood and quicksilver. Dragon's blood was once a common item of pharmaceutical commerce, appearing in the British Pharmaceutical Codex until 1934. It was the red-coloured resin obtained from the fruits of various species of *Daemonorops*, also known as the dragon tree. The resin was first obtained from Socotra, an island off Yemen, although it was later imported from Bombay and Zanzibar. It was taken to China by the Arab merchants, who invented the name dragon's blood in order to impress their Chinese customers.

Dragon's blood was stocked in most pharmacies and was used at one time as a mild astringent, but later it became used mainly as a dye in etching and lithography. It was also used for the more mundane purpose of colouring plasters and varnishes, such as those used in the making of violins. However, such an evocative name encouraged more fanciful uses, and in some parts of the country it acquired a reputation as a charm to restore love. Wootton reported in his 1910 *Chronicles* that "maidens whose swains are unfaithful or neglectful procure a piece, wrap it in paper, and throw it on the fire, saying 'may he no pleasure or profit see, till he come back again to me'."

Quicksilver, or mercury, has a long history of use for medicinal purposes, not least in the treatment of venereal diseases, and it was once used in combination with chalk as a laxative in children. Its unusual physical properties

were also well known and regarded with some awe and, over the years, it acquired a wide variety of uses. Its use in combination with dragon's blood was recalled by Michael Peretz, who undertook his apprenticeship with Boots The Chemists in Guernsey in the 1930s. He remembers some of the customers who used to come into the shop:

The country cousins would come in on a Saturday from the outlying districts of Guernsey. They would speak in Guernsey patois. They would speak English, but it was heavily accented. They had some pretty ancient ideas about medicine too. They still believed to some extent in witchcraft, for example. We would get a request for a half ounce of dragon's blood and a tiny little bottle of quicksilver. It took me a long time to work out what that was all about. But apparently in the country districts (and remember we are now talking about 1934 or '35) girls would believe that throwing dragon's blood into the fire, and casting quicksilver into the fire as well, they would see the image of their husband to be. This was quite a regular request.

Situations like this, in which ordinary items of commerce, such as dragon's blood and quicksilver, were given magical powers by simple country people were, of course, quite common. An examination of other pharmaceutical records confirms that dragon's blood was used in this way elsewhere in Britain.

A reference to the practice appears in the recordings made by the Nottingham branch of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society as part of its 150th anniversary celebrations in 1991. Wilfred Ayres undertook his apprenticeship in the Nottingham area in the 1930s. He recalls:

Dragon's blood was a powder used by painters to colour varnish. Within my lifetime in pharmacy it was bought by lovesick female teenagers. Thrown onto the embers of a dying fire, it briefly showed a picture of their loved one, and sent them happily to bed.

Dragon's blood continues to be available, as many internet sites confirm, along with

quicksilver, although whether their use in this way continues is more doubtful.

Charms and amulets

The origin of necklaces as a form of treatment is credited to a Greek physician by the name of Oribasius. He was a friend of the Emperor Julian and, like Galen, was a native of Pergamos. Oribasius compiled some 72 books bringing together the medical knowledge of the time. In one of them he recommended the use of a necklace of beads made of peony wood. This was to be worn by those subject to epilepsy, although he did not recommend reliance on this method alone.

The idea of wearing necklaces to prevent disease is at least as old. The Romans hung red coral round the necks of their infants to protect them from the evil eye. In his memoirs, entitled 'Pack up your medicines', Victor Hammond recalled that as a student in 1939 he received a selection of raw materials from British Drug Houses:

Some had a foul odour, like asafoetida, which had been used in former times in "tidy bags", hung around the necks of unfortunate children in the belief that the sickening smell would keep diseases at bay.

Medicated necklaces continued as a popular dosage form throughout the centuries, and indeed well into the second half of the 20th century. Many community pharmacists recall Simpson's Iodine Locketts, which were available in a variety of different presentations. For example, Basil Trasler, who undertook his apprenticeship in Northampton in the late 1940s, said:

I remember iodine lockets, which I'm pretty certain were Simpson's Iodine Locketts. I was still at elementary school, and I remember that, along with thousands of others, my mother was taken in by them, and I had to wear an iodine locket. So that would be about 1932. Then subsequently I remember a large locket being brought out that was designed to hang over the entrance door to a room, and thus presumably kill all the bugs in the room. And I also recall that Simpson's used to regularly have a full page advertisement in the Daily Mail for Simpson's Iodine preparations, which was expensive even in those days. I assumed that the Simpson iodine preparations had disappeared before the war, probably in the 1930s, but apparently they continued well into the 1950s.

Iodine lockets were used by millions of people around the country. In a personal communication, retired pharmacist Bill Jackson also recalls wearing the lockets as a child. He told me: "I wore a Simpson's Iodine Locket when I was a child in the 1930s. It consisted of a disc-shaped bakelite container that was suspended round my neck by means of a ribbon. It had a pleasant antiseptic smell. Over a period of time it gradually lost its smell. I think its purpose was to protect the wearer from attack by germs, particularly from the common cold". The last reference to

Simpson's Iodolock Iodine Locketts appears in the Sanger's catalogue of 1941–42. Other brand's included Canda's Locketts, illustrated in Ayrtton Saunder's catalogue of 1936.

Something special

Until well into the 20th century Latin was the universal language of medicine. In pharmacies across the country abbreviated Latin names appeared on the shop rounds and other containers. Latin was used for writing prescriptions; it acted as a secret code for passing messages between the doctor and the pharmacist, with the patient acting as messenger. Both the doctor and the pharmacist could safely assume an ignorance of Latin on the part of all but a handful of the public. This assumption was often made use of by the doctor, even for private patients. John Savage recalled an incident in York in the 1940s:

On one occasion one of the account customers had gone down to Harley Street in London, and he came in proudly with this private prescription on Harley Street headed notepaper. It had beautiful long hand directions in Latin. It was for butazolidine which had just become available on prescription; it was the latest wonder drug. We were completely baffled by this great long Latin direction, but we eventually deciphered it as "take three days to obtain". In other words, the doctor wanted to give the patient the impression that it was something unique, being obtained specially for him. For him just to walk in and have it straight off the shelf (we had it readily available and the National Health Service patients were getting it!) would have been quite unacceptable.

By prescribing the latest drug the Harley Street doctor was doubtless keen to demonstrate to his patient that he was at the cutting edge of medicine. And the patient would have firmly believed that the latest drug must be much more effective than anything that had gone before.

Pharmacists were not allowed to discuss the medicine with the patient and, if the patient asked what the medicine was for or what it was called, they were politely referred back to the doctor. I suspect few of them actually bothered, which was of course the intended outcome.

Latin names helped to endow even the most ineffective of preparations with powerful therapeutic properties. The placebo effect has of course been well known for many years, and most doctors did not hesitate to prescribe preparations that had little more than a soothing or psychological effect. Often the writing of a prescription was a mechanism for terminating the consultation and

some doctors did so with a sense of desperation. Many pharmacists reported receiving prescriptions for a product with the mysterious initials ADT. In his book of recollections entitled 'Sixty-two years a Fratton pharma-

that two aspirins last thing at night helped them to sleep. Another example comes from Grace Goodman from Canterbury, Kent, who undertook her apprenticeship in the late 1940s:

The incident that I remember most vividly is this pharmacist in Lowestoft, who had a town-wide reputation for his tablets to help you get through the driving test. He used to sell two APC [aspirin, phenacetin and caffeine] tablets in a box, and he used to tell people to take one the night before the test and the other one two hours before they were going to take the test. It was to steady their nerves, and he used to charge them about five shillings in old money. And people would come from all over the place and ask "can we have some of your driving test tablets please?"

The label on the box only had the words 'the tablets' on it, rather than the proper name. So patients were none the wiser, and APC tablets no doubt did the job of calming nervous individuals as any others before the arrival of the beta-blockers.

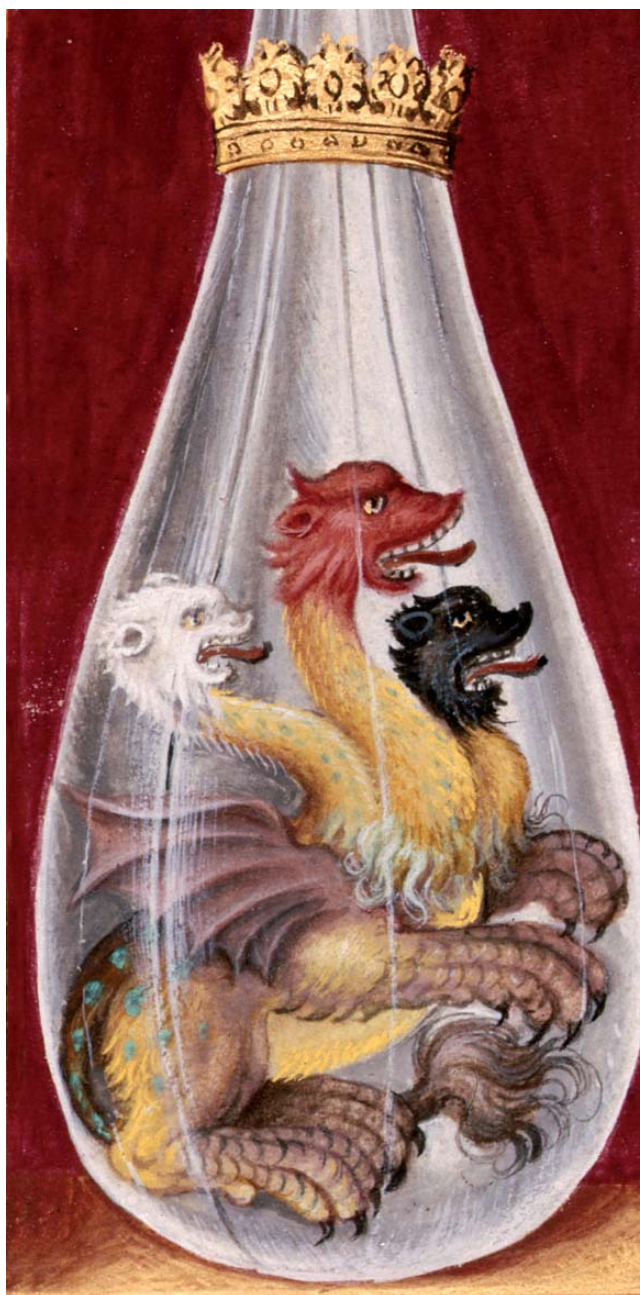
And for my next trick. . .

Sometimes the pharmacist was quite literally asked to perform a conjuring trick. Alan Dickman was born in 1915 and took over his father's shop in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire in the 1940s. He remembers some of the local people who used to come into the shop while he was still a child:

One day a woman came in and told my father that an elderly aunty was staying with them. They were fed up with her, and she was going home the next day. But she had diarrhoea, and the woman asked my father if he could make something up for her. So he made something up (it was probably kaolin and morphine) and that was that. But a few days later she came back, and my father asked her "did you get rid of aunty then?" "Oh yes," she said, "two doses and aunty was cured". And then she added "it seems a pity to waste the rest of the medicine. Can you turn it into a cough mixture please?"

It is clear that the role of the community pharmacist in the first half of the 20th century extended to limits far beyond any envisaged in the new pharmacy contract. Most of these supplementary roles did not survive the introduction of the NHS, and certainly not the creation of the world wide web. Perhaps it's just as well.

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cist', Richard Tremlett recalled as an apprentice working in the basement dispensary of a busy pharmacy in Hampshire:

Down came a prescription one day which called for 12 ounces of ADT. I had no idea what that meant. When I asked [the pharmacist] he told me gleefully that ADT stood for "Any Damn Thing".

Driving test tablets

Patients sometimes attach great psychological significance to ordinary medicinal products, giving them properties that a randomised controlled trial might find difficulty in demonstrating. There are, for example, many cases of patients convinced of the sedative properties of aspirin, believing unshakably