

Part thirteen

Access to care, 1880–1930

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Self-medication

Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum. Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1971), pp. 97–9.

In the early twentieth century – as in the present – most illness was diagnosed not by doctors, but by the sufferer, who also treated the problem using over-the-counter remedies. Robert Roberts's account of working-class life in the north of England, seen from the vantage point of the corner shop, gives a valuable insight into the trade in patent medicines, and the criteria by which purchasers judged the value of these remedies.

This was the heyday of quack medicines, a time when millions of the new literates were reading newspaper advertisements without the knowledge to gauge their worth. Innumerable nostrums, some harmless, some vicious, found ready sale among the ignorant. One had to be seriously ill before a household would saddle itself with the expense of calling a doctor,* in our case an elderly Irishman famous for kindness and wheezing whisky fumes. At week ends people purged themselves with great doses of black draught, senna pods, cascara sagrada, and

* In our district more people were sued in the county court for non-payment of doctors' bills than for any other reason. This somewhat dents the myth of the golden-hearted medico 'forgetting' the debts of his poorer patients. But in that world of private enterprise many slum doctors were hard up enough until the Health Insurance Act of 1911 (against which the BMA fought tooth and nail) put them off their bicycles and into motor cars.

their young with Gregory powder, licorice powder and California syrup of figs. For all these on Friday they came to the shop in constant procession. Through the advice of doctors and wide advertisement the working class had an awful fear of constipation, a condition brought on by the kind of food they ate.

The sick too found relief in medicaments from the corner shop, supplied by manufacturing ‘chemists’. Few of these had any qualifications. One of the traders who sold to us had entered the profession via the mineral water business. His early attempts at a cough medicine (6d per two-ounce bottle), though attractive in colour, had run thin as ginger beer and fallen a drug on the market.¹ But he learned quickly. With such mixtures content and colouring meant little; high viscosity was all. His next concoction slid down the gullet like warm pitch. Bronchitics swore by it and sales soared.

Pills sold at a penny a box, any doubts as to their potency being quieted by the venerable image of their maker smiling from the lid. He had cause for amusement. Nearly all the pills appeared to possess a dual purpose: they ‘attacked’ at one and the same time the ills of two intestines—‘Head and Stomach’, ‘Blood and Stomach’, ‘Back and Kidney’, ‘Back and Bladder’, and indeed almost any pair of organs that could in decency be named. Whatever their aim, however, for ease of manufacture all pills contained the same ingredients—soap and a little aperient;² but they differed in colour, the ‘blood and stomach’ variety being red, say, and the ‘back and bladder’ a pea green. Some colour sense was required, it seemed, in marketing. A pink blood and digestive pill might go down famously in Leeds, only to be rejected entirely by Liverpudlians, whose stomachs would settle for nothing but a pellet in a warm brown shade.

With us a week seldom passed without somebody’s baby having ‘convulsions’. ‘Mother’s Friend’, known in the district as ‘Knock-out Drops’, was always in demand for the fretful, especially on mid-Saturday evenings. ‘It relieves your child from pains,’ said the advertisement, ‘and the little cherub awakes bright as a button.’ This ‘Soothing Mixture’ (laced with tincture of opium) would guarantee to keep baby in a coma until late Sunday morning. Meanwhile mother spent two happy hours in the Snug of the ‘Boilermaker’s’, undisturbed yet not unmarked. Tincture of opium figured too as the kick in a pricey cough cure we sold. A good dose would grip for a short while even the consumptive’s spasms, to bring flickers of renewed hope that soon died.

¹ failed to sell.

² *aperient*: a laxative.

‘Therapion’ had a good run. This ‘New French Remedy’ was unique in that it claimed not only to induce venery³ but also to heal any unfortunate consequences of it. ‘Therapion’, we read, ‘stimulates the vitality of weak men, yet contains besides all the desiderata for curing gleet,⁴ discharges, piles, blotches and premature decay.’ ‘French and Belgian doctors’ swore by it. Floratino, too, was ‘highly recommended’. At 2s 6d a bottle it ‘imparted a peculiarly pearly whiteness to the teeth [before the enamel flaked] and a delightful fragrance to the breath’. With his best suit out of pawn, a dose of Therapion and a mouth washed with Floratino, a young man could feel all set for Saturday night. ‘St Clair’s Specific for Ladies’ had more serious aims; this ‘prevented’, among other ailments, ‘Cancer, Tumors [*sic*] and varicose veins’.

The boldest purveyor, who took a quarter-page spread in the local newspaper, appeared to be a ‘Mr W.H. Veno’. A charismatic figure, he was shown standing before a screen in a great beam of light. ‘His marvellous diagnostic power’, the advertisement assured us, ‘borders on the superhuman. He sees a sick person at a glance, reads his disease without asking a question and with the utmost accuracy.’ He could do this ‘blindfold’, too, and had withal a ‘rare gift’ which enabled him to ‘cure the sick and diseased in a manner that reads like miracles’. ‘Priests and ministers of every denomination’ were numbered among his patients. They all took, we were informed, ‘People’s Strengthener and Health Giver’—Sea-Weed Tonic at 1s 1½d and 2s 9d a bottle. Doctors used it too, because ‘they recognised in Sea-Weed Tonic the most successful medicine that science has yet produced for liver, kidney and blood diseases’.

The imposition of the first tax on patent medicines put their manufacturers in a dilemma. A clause in the Act appeared to imply that proprietary medicines could still be sold free of tax provided their purported curative powers were not advertised. From then on, until the Act was revised, some firms merely announced the title of their product: others paid the tax and hired professional advertising men. The pushers of one pill, in keeping with a claim to have ‘the largest sale of any patent medicine in the world’, made boasts of almost megalomaniac proportions. Their pellet ‘Cured Biliousness, Nervous Disorders, Wind and Pain in the Stomach, Sick Headaches, Giddiness, Fulness and Swellings After Meals, Dizziness and Drowsiness, Cold Chills, Flushes of Heat, Loss of Appetite, Shortness of Breath, Costiveness,⁵ Scurvy and

³ *venery*: the pursuit of, or indulgence in, sexual pleasure.

⁴ *gleet*: a discharge of thin, purulent matter.

⁵ *costiveness*: constipation.

Blotches of the Skin, Disturbed Sleep, Frightful Dreams and All Nervous and Trembling Sensations, Etc.’ ‘This is no fiction,’ the ad-man went on. ‘These are FACTS testified continually by members of all classes of society. No Female should be without them. They will restore Females of all ages to sound health.’

And the females took his advice: we sold them at the shop in screws of paper, three for a halfpenny, in endless succession. A simple aperient had taken on magic potency.

Tucked away in corners of the local newspaper one saw other medical announcements. These offered assurances to ‘Ladies’, ‘Women’ and ‘Females’ of their ability to remove ‘obstructions’ of all kinds, ‘no matter how obstinate or long-standing’.⁶ The advertisers usually had foreign names and obscure London addresses. But most of our women in need of such treatment relied on prayer, massive doses of pennyroyal syrup, and the right application of hot, very soapy water. There were even those who in desperation took abortifacients sold by vets for use with domestic animals. Yet birth control continued to be looked upon as a sin against the Holy Ghost.