

History of Medicine

The British Dispensatory, 1747

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SUMMARY

Some of the more exotic formulations of the *British Dispensatory* of 1747, and their uses, are discussed.

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The College of Physicians was incorporated by Charter in the reign of Henry VIII in the year 1518. Proposals for an official pharmacopoeia were first put forward in 1585 and after the appointment of committees in 1589 to undertake the selection and compilation, the first official index, the *Pharmacopoeia Londonensis*, was published in 1618. The work was dedicated to James I, and His Majesty's proclamation requiring all the apothecaries in the realm to obey this pharmacopoeia and this only, was dated 26 April 1618. The first edition was published in May 1618, but as the printers had 'snatched away from our hands this little work not yet finished off', the second edition was published in December 1618. This replaced the earlier one and became the basis of the following editions. There were 9 subsequent editions of the *London Pharmacopoeia* published in 1650, 1677, 1721, 1746, 1788, 1809, 1824, 1836 and 1851.

The *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* first appeared in 1699 and proved so popular that it reappeared in 11 later editions, these being published in 1722, 1735, 1744, 1756, 1774, 1783, 1792, 1803, 1817, 1839 and 1841. *The Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* was widely used in England and Ireland, as well as in Scotland, and it was considered to be of a higher standard than either the *London* or *Dublin Pharmacopoeias*.

The *Dublin Pharmacopoeia* was first published in 1807 and appeared in only two further editions, the last being printed in 1850.

In 1864 the first edition of the now familiar *British Pharmacopoeia* was published, and this superseded the London, Edinburgh and Dublin standards.

Most of the earlier pharmacopoeias were published in Latin, the first authorised English translation of the *London Pharmacopoeia* appearing in 1788. To overcome this problem there were many unauthorised translations of the Latin texts into English. A most interesting example of an unauthorised translation is *The British Dispensatory*, an anonymous translation of the *London Pharmacopoeia* of 1746 and the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* of 1744, published in London in 1747 (Fig. 1).

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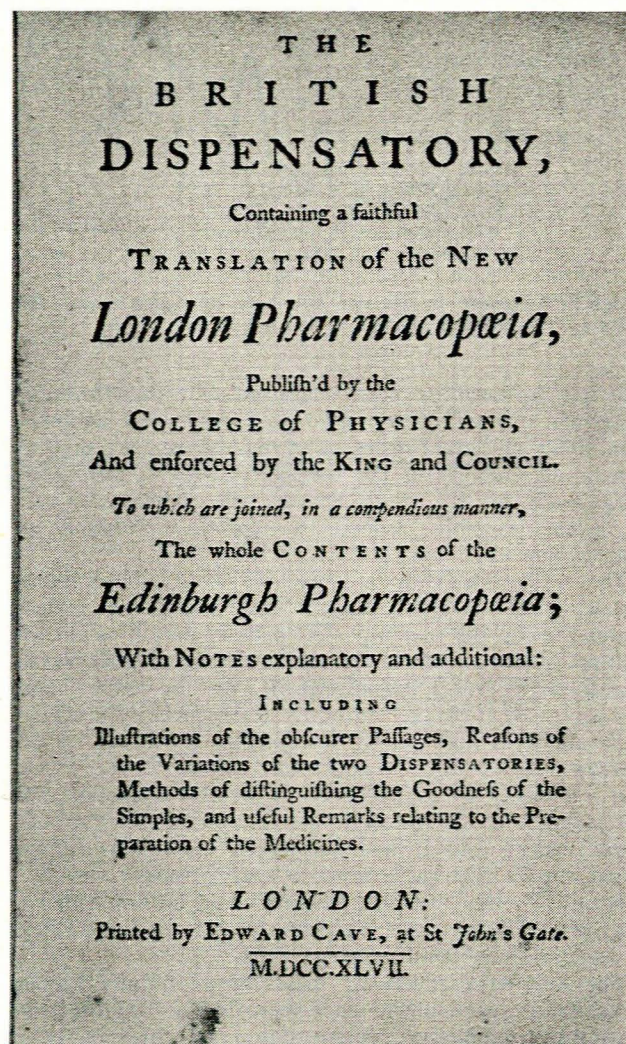


Fig. 1. Frontispiece of *The British Dispensatory*.

UNAUTHORISED TRANSLATION

The translator's preface to this publication opens with the following words: 'A Dispensatory is both a register of simples which constitute the *materia medica*, and a directory that teaches the art of preparing them and compounding them for medicinal uses. It is highly incumbent, therefore, on all concerned either in the composing or publishing of these directories, to give them the strictest attention, in order to attain the utmost accuracy; because the least error in the preparation of a medicine may not

only frustrate those means, on which numbers rely for their relief, but prove of the most fatal consequence. This sentiment being ever present, and strongly impressed on me, while engaged in this work, I hope it has produced an adequate effort; and that (my care having been proportionate to the great importance of its end) no neglected or misapprehended passage has in the translation either perverted the sense of the original, or fallen short of its requisite explication: Nor have I been less solicitous to add to the translation whatever, though omitted in the original, was necessary to be known.' This seems to indicate that the translator, although anonymous, was probably someone with a certain amount of pharmaceutical knowledge.

The translator tends to be fairly critical of the pharmacopoeia itself. 'I shall, here, make but few animadversions on the Pharmacopoeia itself. The authority under which it is published, will too sufficiently enforce its observance, to render any private recommendation necessary; and to condemn it, would be certainly against justice, when all due allowances are made from the consideration that it was not intended to reform the practice of medicine, but only as it regards the preparation of remedies already in established use. It were, however, to be wished, that instead of adding some new ones equally exceptionable with those they have laid aside, they had either absolutely rejected all the difficult processes for obtaining, by laborious and expensive methods, substances no way differing from others which are common and cheap, or had at east noted them as such. Of this kind are a prescription for making sea salt, under the pompous title *Spiritus salis marini coagulatus*; the unnecessary forming of common green vitriol from oil of vitriol and iron, under the specious name of *Sal mortis*; and the borrowing from antimony its sulphur and name, to make factitious cinabar, (prepared in a costly manner) pass for something different from what it really is. Such a retrenchment of all superfluous operation, on the same account, would have been worthy of the learning and abilities of the most illustrious body of Physicians in Europe; and would have deprived the sceptical of a handle to charge physic with being founded rather on theory than practice.'

The translator continues, giving reasons for the need of a translation of the works: 'A work of this kind must not only be necessary for all druggists, chemists, and practitioners in the art of healing, but of great service to such as are studious of their health, and unwilling blindly to acquiesce, with the generality, in the skill and prescriptions of the physician. Nor, indeed, is there any reason why we should know to chuse our food and not our physic, or be less capable of understanding an apothecary's than a cook's bill of fare.' Already the education of the public into the ways of medicine was beginning!

One final reason for the translation: 'I thought it might be a pleasure to an English ear, to have the Formulas flow easy in an English idiom, unfettered from that stiffness of the Latin phrase.'

BIZARRE ITEMS

The *London Pharmacopoeia* of 1746 was very different from its predecessors. Among those who took an active

part in its preparation were the President of the College, Dr Plumtre, and Drs Crowe, Mead, Heberden and Treind. In the preface to the work, the old 'inelegant and confused mixtures' and 'the antidotes, weakly and superstitiously sought from oracles, dreams and astrological fancies' are severely condemned, and the College declares its intention of 'freeing the book as much as possible from whatever remains of former pedantry.'

Indeed, several of the more bizarre cures present in the 1721 *London Pharmacopoeia* were removed from the 1746 edition. These include, among others, human fat, unicorn's horn, spiders' webs, moss from the human skull and bone from the stag's heart. Notwithstanding these good intentions, the old pharmacy is still abundantly represented, despite the College's declaration in the preface.

The most unsavoury compounds described in the *London Pharmacopoeia* are probably the substances of animal origin. In the 1746 edition there are still mentioned crabs' claws, crabs' eyes, pearls, woodlice, oystershells, skinks' bellies, sponge, vipers, earthworms, bees, toads and frogspawn. The preparation of some medicaments using the above ingredients is described.

SOME CURES

'Prepared woodlice. The woodlice being wrapt up in a very coarse thin linen cloth, let them be hung up in a closed vessel, over heated spirits of wine, that they may be killed, and become fit to be powdered. The *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* orders the woodlice to be put alive into a proper vessel, and dried with a slow heat; but that is both more cruel and tedious than the method here directed.' The powder so produced was given, either by itself, or compounded with other medicaments, for dropsy and jaundice.

'Viper wine. Take of dried vipers two ounces; white wine three pints; infuse, with a gentle heat, for a week, and filter.'

'Viper's broth. Take a viper of moderate size, the skin, head and intestines being taken from it, of water two pounds; boil them till the water is reduced to about the quantity of a pound and a half; then take them off the fire, and when quite cold, if the viper was fresh, take off the concentrated fat. Then put a middle-sized chicken whole, but drawn, and likewise freed from the skin, and all its fat, in to this fat, as yet cold; set it on the fire, and when it boils take it off, and take out the chicken. And immediately cut its flesh in pieces, which put again into the broth, and place it on the fire; lastly, when it begins to boil, take off the scum with great care, and pour out the broth.' Viper wine and viper's broth were used for itch, leprosy, skin eruptions and barrenness in women, among other disorders. They were also used as aphrodisiacs. In fact, viper's broth was probably quite nourishing.

'Oil of earthworms. Take of earthworms well washed, half a pound; ripe olive oil, two pints; white wine, half a pint: Boil them in balneo, till the wine is consumed, after which strain out the oil by pressure.' This preparation was given to children for internal worms, compounded with other ingredients for lung complaints, and was applied externally for smallpox and plague.

Mithridatium and Theriaca

It is interesting to note that the *London Pharmacopoeia* of 1746 contains formulae for the two famous antidotes Mithridatium and Theriaca. These two antidotes were reputed to counteract all poisons and bites of venomous animals, relieve all pains, weaknesses of the stomach, asthma, difficulty of breathing, phthisis, colic, jaundice, dropsy, weakness of sight, plague and inflammation of the bladder and kidney. A universal panacea indeed!

The formula of Mithridatium was supposedly invented by Mithridates VI, King of Pontus in Asia Minor, born in 134 BC. When eventually Pompey defeated Mithridates in Greece, his medicinal formulae were taken to Rome and Mithridatium became a popular antidote among the Romans.

Mithridatium contained 48 ingredients, the formula in the 1746 *London Pharmacopoeia* being: myrrh, saffron, agaric, ginger, cinnamon, spikenard, frankincense, treacle mustard seed, of each ten drachms hartwort seed, balsam of Peru, camels' hay, French lavender flowers, custos root, galbanum, Cyprus turpentine, long pepper, castor, juice of the hypocistis, storax, opoponax, Indian leaves, of each one ounce, cassia lignea, mountain poly, white pepper, scordium leaves, Cretan carrot seeds, carpobabamum, troches of cyperus, bdellium, of each seven drachms, Celtic spikenard, gum arabic, Macedonian parsley seed, opium,

lesser cardamom seed, fennel seed, gentian root, red roses, dittany of Crete, of each five drachms, aniseed, asarabacca, sweet flag, wild valerian root, fagapenum, of each three drachms, spignel root, acacia, skinks' bellies, St Johns wort seed, of each two and a half drachms. Add purified honey thrice the weight of the above species, add Canary wine sufficient to dissolve the gums; mix them into an electuary.⁷

Theriaca was invented by Nero's physicians and was devised as an improvement on Mithridatium. The most important addition which appeared in the new formula was the introduction of vipers. The formula for Theriaca in the 1746 *London Pharmacopoeia* contains 61 ingredients.

In 1745, when the new edition of the *London Pharmacopoeia* was almost ready for issue, a scholarly exposure of the absurdity of these two formulations which still occupied space in all the official formularies was published by Dr William Heberden, a leading physician of the day. Although it was too late to cause the deletion of the formulae in the 1746 edition, that was the last time they appeared in the *Pharmacopoeia*, though they had been given in all editions from 1618 onwards.

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