

# Patent Med and the PUBLIC'S

*John Parascandola, PhD*



## COCAINE TOOTHACHE DROPS

Instantaneous Cure!

PRICE 15 CENTS.

Prepared by the

**LLOYD MANUFACTURING CO.**

219 HUDSON AVE., ALBANY, N. Y.

For sale by all Druggists.

(Registered March 1885.)

See other side

As the name reveals, Cocaine Toothache Drops eased the pain of toothache with a formula that included cocaine.

# icines HEALTH

IN 1906, the year in which the first federal Food and Drug Act was passed, a Congressional committee estimated that there were approximately 50,000 patent medicines being made and sold in the United States. In the days of unregulated marketing, these products often posed threats to people's health as well as to their pocketbooks. Some contained dangerous ingredients such as opiates and cocaine, and even those that were harmless may have kept patients from seeking proper medical treatment with the false hope of a cure. This article provides a glimpse into the patent medicine industry in 19th-century America, before the advent of drug regulation by the federal government.



This product for restoring sexual vitality (an earlier era's Viagra?) plays on the presumed virility of Mormons because of their association with polygamy. The old man in the advertisement is shown as rejuvenated after using the product.

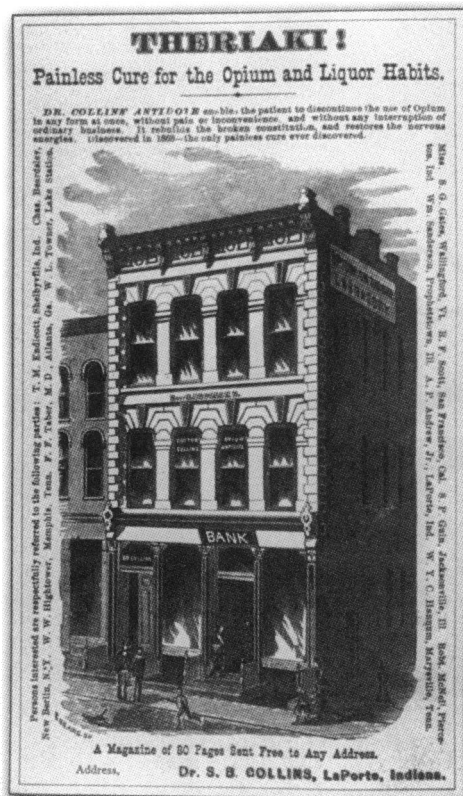
The term "patent medicine" refers to a proprietary or trademarked remedy intended for self-medication. The term had its roots in the European practice of a monarch issuing "letters patent" (from the Latin *patens*, or open) granting monopoly privileges to individuals. Our modern patent system grew out of this practice.

"Letters patent" were granted to the makers of certain medical remedies. Although few of the proprietary medicines that flooded the American market in the 18th and 19th centuries received this distinction or were patented, the public referred to them all as patent medicines, and the term persisted.

Many British patent medicines were imported into the American colonies, but after the Revolutionary War a home-grown industry began to develop. Its products rarely contained any new or special ingredients but consisted of herbs and drugs that were listed in the standard drug formularies of the day. They were given distinctive packaging, advertised widely, and often promoted as miracle drugs.

**Creative advertising.** As the 19th century progressed, advertising budgets for the more popular patent medicines expanded considerably. By the close of the century, for example, the annual advertising budget for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound for the treatment of diseases of women was about a million dollars. Patent medicine manufacturers were the real pioneers of American

**This innocent scene does not reveal the fact that Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup soothed teething pain with morphine sulfate.**



**The advertisement for this patent medicine claims that it would allow the patient to give up opium with no pain or inconvenience. What is not revealed is the fact that the medicine itself contained opium and thus the patient still remained addicted to the drug while taking the product.**

advertising techniques. Instead of relying solely on newspaper and magazine advertisements, they promoted their wares in every imaginable way. They distributed pamphlets, calendars, almanacs, books of stories, cookbooks, joke books, and various other publications with advertising interspersed throughout the text like commercials in a television show. Horse carriages, trees, walls, barns, and even the sides of mountains often carried advertisements for these remedies. "Medicine shows" featured entertainment ranging from minstrel shows to wild west shows.

The patent medicine makers exploited a range of human needs and emotions in promoting their products. Fear played a significant role in many advertising campaigns; grim advertisements depicted death, disease, suffering, and evil. Advertisements often exaggerated symptoms and even normal physiological phenomena into sure signs of dread disease, with the cure readily at hand—the advertiser's product, of course.

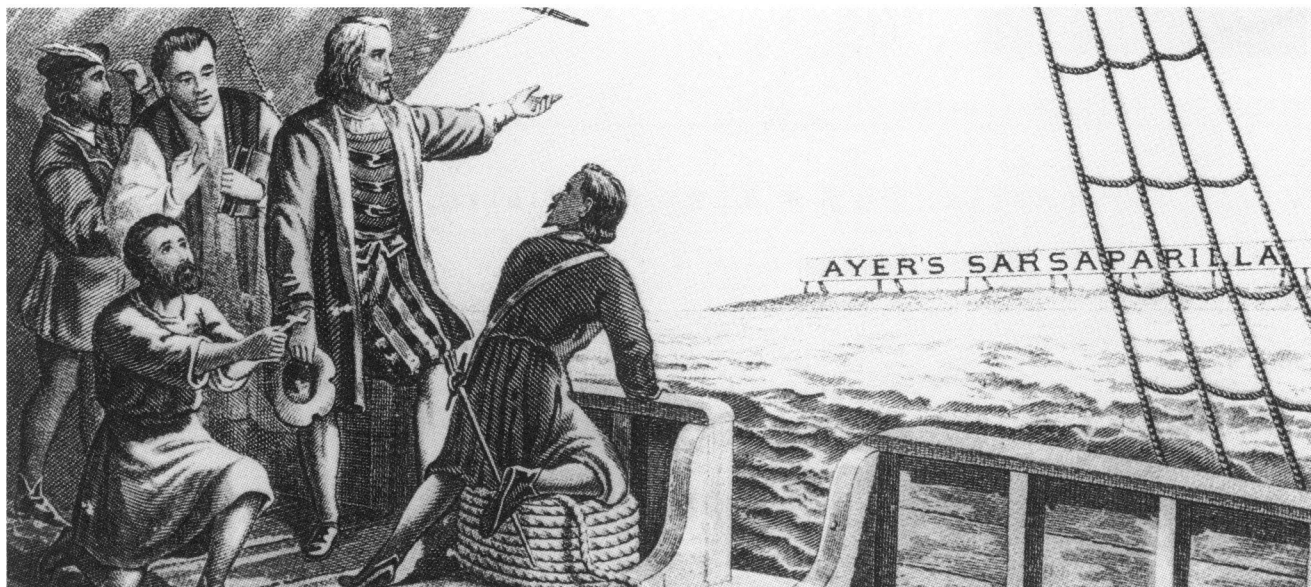
Not surprisingly, sex was also exploited by the promoters of patent medicines; for example, numerous

products claimed to restore sexual vitality to aging men. Patriotism was also called into service; Uncle Sam, various American heroes, and even Presidents were not infrequently depicted in patent medicine advertising.

Some ads relied on the exotic. Ancient times and foreign lands lent a certain appeal to some remedies, such as Mexican Mustang Liniment, Dr. Drake's Canton Chinese Hair Cream, and Roman Eye Balsam. Dr. M.S. Watson's Great Invincible Birghami Stiff Joint Panacea was said to have been recently rediscovered along the Nile. Native Americans were sufficiently exotic and mysterious to many buyers to be an effective symbol. The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company preparations, for example, were advertised as having been made on a Kickapoo reservation by wise medicine men.

**"Good for what ails you."** Patent medicine makers were never modest about their claims, and many of these products were advertised as virtual panaceas, good for whatever ailed the purchaser. Some of the products were totally worthless. For example, Radam's Microbe Killer consisted of traces of acid, a little red wine, and roughly 99% water. Some ingredients did possess pharmacological activity; for example, some had laxative or expectorant properties, but rarely did the prod-



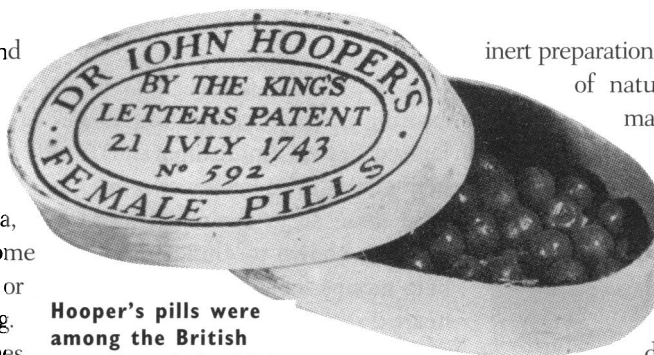


An advertisement for Ayer's Sarsaparilla shows a sign for the product at Columbus's discovery of America, perhaps suggesting that the importance of this medicine was on a par with the discovery of the New World.

ucts possess all the benefits and powers attributed to them in advertisements. Among the more common botanical ingredients were camphor, ipecac, peppermint, rhubarb, sarsaparilla, sassafras, and wintergreen. Some ingredients were essentially inert or provided little more than flavoring.

While many patent medicines were at least harmless if not beneficial, others contained potentially dangerous drugs such as opiates and cocaine. Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, designed to pacify babies with teething and other problems, contained morphine sulfate as the active ingredient. While it relieved the baby's teething pains, it did so at the risk of addiction or a fatal overdose. Alcohol was also a common ingredient. The products known as bitters frequently had high alcohol contents and were sometimes even sold by the drink in saloons in areas where alcoholic beverages were prohibited.

Since these products were incapable of curing tuberculosis, cancer, heart disease, and many other conditions for which they were advertised, how can we explain their popularity? First, we must remember that there were many diseases which medicine could do little to treat in the 19th century, and patients may have turned to patent medicines in desperation if their doctors could offer no real hope. Second, some of these products did provide relief of symptoms such as headache and constipation, as do the over-the-counter remedies of today. We also have to take the placebo effect into account; a patient who believes that he or she is being helped by a particular treatment may actually improve even if the "remedy" in question is an



Hooper's pills were among the British remedies of the 18th century granted monopoly privileges under "letters patent" from the king, as indicated on the box.

inert preparation. In addition, the healing power of nature should not be underestimated; many illnesses are self-limiting, and patients eventually recover even if they do nothing. Finally, self-diagnoses made by a frightened patient without the benefit of medical consultation, especially of diseases such as cancer or tuberculosis, could easily be erroneous, leading to

the possibility of dramatic "cures."

Beginning with the 1906 Food and Drug Act, the federal government has taken steps to curb the abuses of the patent medicine industry. In spite of significant improvements in regulation, however, medical quackery is not yet dead, and perhaps never will be. There will probably always be individuals ready to prey on the desperation of the sick. In the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Quackery and idolatry are all but immortal." ■

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#### SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

- Holbrook SH. The golden age of quackery. New York: Collier Books; 1962.
- Young JH. The toadstool millionaires: a social history of patent medicines in America before federal regulation. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1961.
- Young JH. American health quackery: collected essays. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1992.