

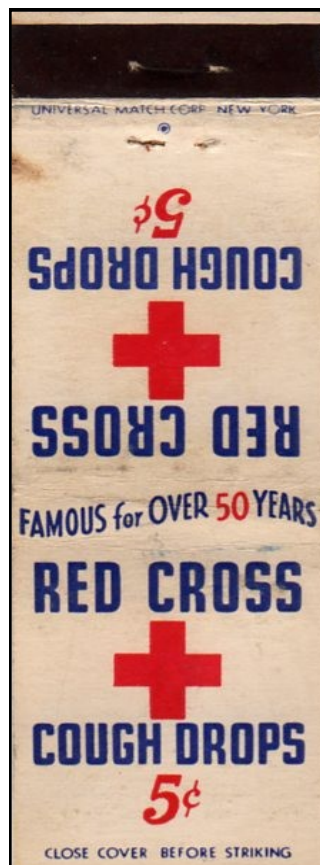
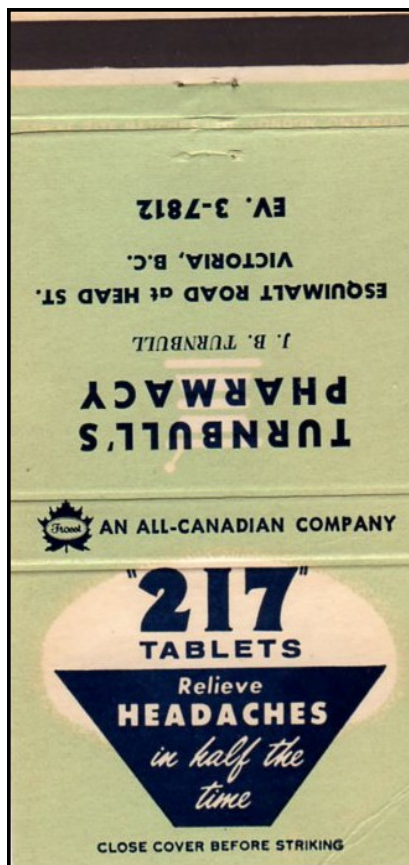
A Short History of Medicine: I

Medicines, of course, go far back into prehistory, herbal remedies, etc. But when did medicines become big business? The story goes all the way back to the first apothecaries in my favorite era, the Middle Ages.

An apothecary's shop was full of various cures, most of which he prepared himself. He was usually a trusted member of the medieval community, but at times, apothecaries were accused of practicing magic or witchcraft. In an age before people could easily access doctors and hospitals, the apothecary was an ordinary person's best hope of a cure or relief from an illness. Because apothecaries saw different people with various illnesses each day, most had a huge knowledge of the human body and herbal remedies.

The first apothecaries are believed to have traded in the Middle East, with their knowledge gradually transmitting into Europe via merchants and traders. Apothecaries were primarily men and, despite their popularity, were not officially recognized in England until 1606, when the Society of Apothecaries was founded.

Early in the Middle Ages, an apothecary would cultivate all of the plants and herbs needed for his medicines himself. Later, formal supply chains developed, with individuals growing plants to order, for supply to apothecaries.



While some apothecaries worked on a casual basis from their own homes, many had their own retail premises, usually a small shop. The front part of the shop would have shelves full of medicines and herbs and in the back section, the apothecary would prepare medicines as and when they were needed. Ideally, the apothecary would also have access to a garden, where he could grow the herbs and plants he needed to prepare his cures.

Early in the medieval period, apothecaries were often known as spicers or pepperers, because their work involved weighing out small amounts of herbs and spices for use in medicine, or for direct sale to customers. They were involved in importing and distributing spices from abroad, for sale in cooking and in the preparation of products such as spiced wines. [French, Roger *Medicine before Science: The Business of Medicine from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* [Cambridge University Press, 2003]

The next major step takes us to the Renaissance with the appearance of patent medicines. These were named after the “letters patent” granted by the English crown. The first “letters patent” given to an inventor of a secret remedy was issued during the late 17th century. The patent granted the medicine maker a monopoly over his particular formula.

The term “patent medicine” came to describe all pre-packaged medicines sold “over-the-counter” without a doctor’s prescription. In the United States very few preparations were ever actually patented.

Many of the earliest English patent medicines, such as Turlington’s

Balsam of Life, Bateman’s Pectoral Drops, and Hooper’s Female Pills, were very successful within the American colonies. Some of these medicines survived well into the 20th century, such as Dicey’s Dr. Bateman’s Drops, whose original patent was granted by King George I in 1726.

[continued in our next issue]

