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## A photographic essay:

### The history of “medicinal specifics” as addiction cures in the United States

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*I know of no class of people who have been so victimized by the quack as the inebriate.*  
(Rogers, 1913)

Drugs have served as adjuncts in the treatment of alcohol and other drug problems in the United States since such treatment began, but the promotion of various drugs as complete curative agents marks a special thread in the history of addiction treatment. Nineteenth and early twentieth century inebriate homes and asylums found themselves competing for clients and cultural attention with a rapidly growing proprietary drug industry that promised cures for “alcohol, tobacco and drug habits” that were faster, cheaper, less personally disruptive and more discrete than institutional treatment (White, 1998). This essay briefly reviews the long history of such bottled and boxed home cures for addiction in the United States.

American medicine was at a primitive state of development in the nineteenth century. The title “doctor” was as likely to be adopted as earned, and trained physicians

competed with midwives, folk healers and traveling medicine shows. It was in this context that a patent medicine industry emerged to offer quick panaceas for the treatment of trauma and disease. While its aggressively promoted alcohol-, opiate- and cocaine-laced products cured nothing, they provided symptomatic relief for almost everything. Heightened drug potency (the isolation of morphine and cocaine and the introduction of the hypodermic syringe), high availability (non-existent or weak prescription laws), the absence of product labeling, and public naiveté about the chronic effects of drug consumption all set the stage for the addiction of a growing number of American citizens ((Musto, 1973; Morgan, 1981). That stage became quickly filled with a long and ever-changing list of mood-altering products.

Opiate-based medicines were aggressively promoted to women (Godfrey’s Cordial, McMunn’s Elixar) and children (Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup and Mother Bailey’s Quieting Syrup) (Plate One). By the close of the nineteenth century, heroin was

publicly promoted alongside aspirin (Plate Two). There were cocaine-laced products (Wine of Coca, Coca Cigarettes, and Dr. Birney's Catarrh Powder) that promised cure for everything from consumption to dandruff (Plates Three and Four). And there were a large number of alcohol-laced "medicines" (Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root, Paine's Celery Compound, and Hostetter's Stomach Bitters) (Plate Five), some of which were promoted as temperance remedies, in spite of alcohol content as high as 45 percent by volume.

The growing problems of addiction and the heightened social value of sobriety generated by the American temperance movement opened the market for medicinal specifics that claimed to destroy the appetite for alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. These bottled and boxed cures were distributed by drug companies, private physicians, addiction cure institutes, and by individual entrepreneurs. Reports on hundreds of these products fill the American Medical Association's Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

Products that claimed to cure alcohol-related problems came in two forms: hangover remedies and alcoholism cures. The former, which peaked in popularity by the 1930s, included products like Alka-Nox, Sobrosal, Sober-Up, and Mrs. Moffat's Shoo Fly Powders. Early products claiming to cure alcoholism included the Hay-Litchfield Antidote, Knight's Tonic, White Star Secret Liquor Cure, Alcoban, Alcola, Mickey Finn Powders, and Dr. Haines Golden Specific (Plate Six). There were also a large number of products promising to cure addiction to tobacco (BACO-CURE, Nicotol, Nix-O-Tine, Tobacco Redeemer, and No-To-Bac)(Plate Seven) and addiction to opiates (Antidote, Starnes' Drug Habit Cure, and Narcoti-Cure)(Plates Eight). The opiate cures often came in number-sequenced bottles that constituted gradual withdrawal for some and extended maintenance for others.

The purveyors of addiction cure specifics aggressively marketed their products through health-related books and magazines as well as through newspapers, flyers, and billboards. There were particular

appeals to family members that claimed the alcoholic or addict could be cured secretly through the surreptitious spiking of food and drink with the miracle product (Plate Nine). The alcohol, tobacco and drug cures were marketing directly to physicians and some of the companies paid physicians to provide lists of addicted patients who would then be contacted via unrelenting direct mail solicitation. Prominent celebrity endorsements, extolling secret formulas, and promises of complete comfort ("no substitutes" "no vomiting" "no injections") were the norm in the promotion of these products, as were promises of secrecy and exaggerated claims of cure. Dr. Collin's Painless Opium Antidote promised "never a failure in a single case" The advertisements often claimed added health benefits as a side-effect of their product. The most frequent of such promises were new found energy (e.g., Oxien "cures drunkards and makes weak women walk) and heightened sexual performance (e.g., "No-To-Bac cures impotency and is used with magical effect by men in advanced years") (Helfand, 1996).

Attempts to expose the fraudulent practices of the addiction cure entrepreneurs began with the Medical Society of New York in 1827 and continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 1880s witnessed an expose of fraudulent opium antidotes published in the Journal of the American Medical Association and separate investigations launched by the Massachusetts State Board of Health and the American Association for the Study and Cure of Inebriety (Bradner, 1890; Crothers, 1892; Kerr, 1892). While these studies revealed that most of the cures contained alcohol or opium and sold at higher prices than the drugs themselves, public attention was not galvanized until a 1905 exposé by Samuel Hopkins Adams in *Collier's* magazine (Plate Ten) spurred passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. In response to Hopkin's exposure of the hidden presence of alcohol and opiates in many medicines and in the addiction cures (Plate Eleven), this Act required the accurate labeling of the presence of alcohol, opiates, and cocaine in medicines.

Unfortunately, the story of fraudulent addiction cure specifics does not end in 1906. The American Medical Association detailed new generations of such frauds (e.g., Antialkolin, Coho Drink Cure, St. Anne's Morphine Cure, Tucker's Drug-Habit Cure) in their serialized publication *Nostrums and Quackery*, and the National Better Business Bureau issued warnings in 1929 regarding such cures. Typical of this later generation of cures was Thirty-Two (See Plate Twelve), a leather-encased series of 32 vials (price \$32) that were to be consumed over 48 days as a "complete course of treatment for alcoholism."

An interesting product introduced in the 1930s was an alleged non-intoxicating substitute for alcohol sold under such names as Prescription Brand Whiskey and RMS Private Formula (Masters, 1931). A 1939 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* attacked the advertising claims that the use of these products could turn the chronic alcoholic into a "moderate and sane drinker" (RX Medicinal..., 1939). Bottled cures for alcoholism continued into the 1940s with products like Alcoban and Alconox promising to cure drunkards in twenty-four hours. As late as the 1960s, the Federal Trade Commission was taking legal action to ban the advertising of products like Soberin as a cure for alcoholism.

It can be seen from this brief review that fraud and exploitation are a continuing theme in the design and marketing of alcohol-, opiate- and cocaine-laced products and medicinal specifics claiming to cure addiction. It is in this context that the term iatrogenic takes on two meanings: the development of addiction secondary to self-care or medical treatment, and the harm done in the name of help that constitutes a long thread in the history of addiction treatment.

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**Acknowledgment:** Products and their advertising slogans referenced in this article were identified through the following collections: The American Medical Association's Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection, the Hazelden Archive, the Illinois Addiction Studies Archive, and the private collection of William Helfand.

Plate One: Mrs. Winslow's Soothing  
Syrup (Strong Museum)  
Plate Two: Heroin Add (Bettman Archives)  
Plate Three: Cocaine Toothache  
Advertisement (IASA)  
Plate Four: Cocaine Dandruff  
Advertisement (IASA)  
Plate Five: Hostetter's Bitters (Strong  
Museum)  
Plate Six: Haines Golden Specific  
(Hefand Collection)

Plate Seven: No-To-Bac (Hefand  
Collection)  
Plate Eight: Narcoti-Cure (Strong  
Museum)  
Plate Nine: Drunkards Saved Secretly  
(AMA)  
Plate Ten: Colliers Cover (IASA)  
Plate Eleven: Narcotic Cures and  
their Hidden Contents (IASA)  
Plate Twelve: Twenty-Four (AMA)