



British Society for the
History of Pharmacy

The evolution of pharmacy Theme A, Level 1 The development of the profession



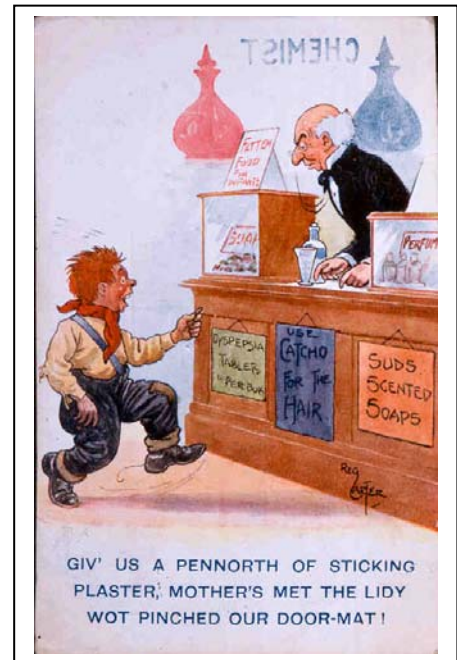
Royal
Pharmaceutical
Society
of Great Britain

What is a pharmacist?

Pharmacists, chemists and druggists

A **pharmacist** is someone who is skilled or engaged in pharmacy, who prepares and dispenses medicines. The use of the word was first recorded in the 1830s in England. The word pharmacy derives from the Greek *Φαρμακεία* meaning the practice of the druggist, becoming the Latin *pharmacia*, then Old French *farmacie*, then *pharmacie* which was first used in England in the 1500s.

Although the term **chemist** is now often used interchangeably with that of **pharmacist**, references to chemists in historical documents sometimes refer to those involved with the study of the science of pure chemistry rather than pharmacy. Between the 1500s and 1700s, the distinctions between alchemy and medicinal chemistry were somewhat blurred. By the mid-19th century 'pure' scientific chemists had their own Chemical Society, formed in 1841.



Chemist and druggist was a term first used to describe both chemical and drug merchants and practitioners of the emerging profession of pharmacy from the late 1700s. It is often used in trade directories and census returns. Under the 1868 Pharmacy Act, the term 'Chemist and Druggist' was used by the Pharmaceutical Society to denote those who had passed its minor examination, and so met the minimum requirement to register as a pharmacist. After 1868, the use of the title chemist and druggist became legally restricted to registered pharmacists only.

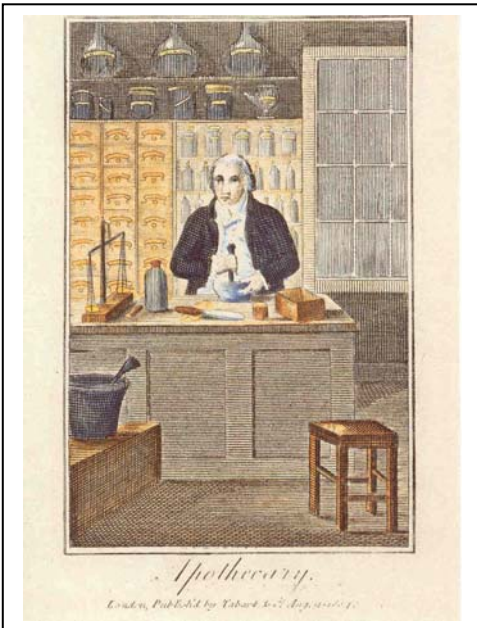
Commercial chemical and drug merchants, sometimes called **druggists**, who were not involved with the dispensing or the sale of scheduled poisons did not have to register with the Society. However, after the Pharmacy Act of 1868, they could no longer legally use the title Chemist and Druggist.

The term **pharmaceutical chemist** dates from the 1700s. At this time, it often referred to scientists, many of them French, who promoted the use of chemical-based therapeutics. By the time the new Pharmaceutical Society adopted the term in the 1840s, it was being more widely applied to those interested in organic chemistry and in the skilled compounding of drugs of all descriptions. Legislation in 1852 stated that the term 'pharmaceutical chemist' should only be used by people who had passed the Society's 'major' examination, or by certain unexamined members of the Pharmaceutical Society who owned their own businesses. A 'Register of Pharmaceutical Chemists' was compiled, but not published, from 1852 onwards. The term Pharmaceutical Chemist was retained after 1868, when registration became compulsory.



Apothecaries and dispensers

The term **apothecary**, often used between the 1600s and 1800s, does not refer to the chemist and druggist. It was used for individuals living in London who had passed the examinations of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London, founded in



1617, or to their often less well qualified counterparts in the provinces. Although the apothecary's practice included a strong dispensing element, it was more all-encompassing than the handling of drugs and chemicals. Following a ruling in the Rose Case (1701-1703/4), apothecaries became legally ratified members of the medical profession, able to prescribe as well as dispense medicines.

Under the Apothecaries Act of 1815, apothecaries who took a specified course of training with the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries could be licensed as general practitioners, and were called licentiates. From 1815 onwards, it was illegal to use the title apothecary without qualifying as a licentiate. Licentiates practised in London and the provinces. The establishment of the General Medical Council in 1858, and growth in University training courses for

medical students in the later 1800s, reduced the significance of the Society of Apothecaries in the training of general practitioners.

Non-professional trained **dispensers** were employed by doctors and pharmacists, and also in institutions such as hospitals, asylums, workhouses, prisons and barracks. They were trained assistants who compounded prescriptions under supervision. From 1815 onwards, the Society of Apothecaries offered an assistants' examination qualifying candidates to compound and dispense drugs under the supervision of an apothecary, pharmacist or doctor. Relatively small numbers of people actually took the exams. Also, not all dispensers had qualified as Assistants through the Society of Apothecaries.

FIND OUT MORE

Links to other sheets:

Theme B: History of the Pharmaceutical Society

Further reading:

Holloway, S W F, *The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain: A political and social history, 1841-1991*, (Pharmaceutical Press, London, 1991)

Other resources:

Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Information Sheet: *Tracing people and premises in pharmacy*