

The Commercialisation of Medicine in the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1640–1700

Modern historians tend to link the commercialisation of medicine with the ‘consumer revolution’ of the eighteenth century.¹ This was said to be a time of societal change, triggered by new processes of production and exchange.² As an ever-increasing range of items, from household durables through to luxury items, appeared on the market they helped both to create and fulfil rising demand. One historian has even wryly commented that the public clamour for such goods far outpaced the population itself.³

According to Roy Porter, proprietary drugs were one of the major growth areas during this period of rising consumerism. He attributes this, in part, to ‘the contemporary prominence of hypochondria’.⁴ Such morbid anxiety was fuelled by shrewd publicity by the manufacturers of patent and proprietary drugs.⁵ Their advertisements seduced potential customers into believing that their products would guarantee longevity, health, fitness and beauty.⁶

While not disputing this later evidence, this article will argue that such developments actually began in the seventeenth century. My argument is based on a systematic examination of advertisements in seventeenth-century English almanacs. As cheap, annual publications that were distributed on a national basis, they were the first examples of mass-media. The advertisements that they contained provide in-depth insight into the early development of proprietary drugs, a topic about which we currently know all too little.

I have chosen to concentrate on what Bernard Capp, the author of the magisterial *Astrology and the Popular Press* has called their ‘golden age’ between 1640 and 1700.⁷ This period began with revolutionary events which created a new and different market for published items.⁸ The breakdown of censorship led to an unprecedented outpouring of both astrological and medical books.⁹ This was particularly true in terms of almanacs, which began a phenomenal rise which continued until 1700.¹⁰ By the end of the seventeenth century printers were regularly producing between 350,000 and 400,000 copies in the last two months of every year.¹¹

The master list of the almanacs used in this study has been compiled from several sources, including *The English Short Title Index*, *Astrology and the Popular Press* and the Internet site 'Early English Books Online'.¹² Out of the 1,673 almanacs that are known to have survived 1,392 or 83.2%, have been examined.¹³ Of these 1,392 almanacs, 72.3% have been found to contain medical information or advice. Such figures suggest that this is the largest comparative study of the medical content of any form of printed seventeenth century English works.¹⁴

Because such large numbers of almanacs exist, it has been possible to make quantitative, as well as qualitative conclusions about their content. These include the ability to chart trends in the inclusion or exclusion of certain types of medical information. One of the most striking findings is that medical advertisements were not only present in large numbers in almanacs during this period, but, more importantly, significantly increased over time. The total number of advertisements in almanacs grew from an average of one for every three almanacs in the period from 1640 to 1644 to almost eleven advertisements per almanac between 1695 and 1699. A variety of goods and services were promoted, including books, medicines, dates of regional fairs and consultations with specialists. From about 1680 onwards, however, the greatest growth can be attributed almost entirely to drug advertisements.

The fact that proprietary medicines were so heavily advertised shows that they were becoming a standard feature in the contemporary 'medical marketplace'. Over the last twenty years, this concept has become a historical commonplace, referring to a society where the demands of a 'medically promiscuous' public resulted in a proliferation of healers, treatments and medical products.¹⁵ Most historians would also agree that a multitude of services that were either bartered or offered at no cost, as in the case of housewives, should be included in the definition.¹⁶ I would argue that the development and growth of proprietary medicines should be acknowledged as another important component of the seventeenth-century medical marketplace.

With the exception of the wide-spread presence of pre-packaged, branded drugs, the medical marketplace of the eighteenth century was little changed from that of the seventeenth. In both, the practitioners at the top of the market hierarchy were the traditional 'tripartite' division of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries.¹⁷ They were joined by various types of quacks, midwives, clergymen, drug peddlers, magical healers, herbalists, astrologers, dealers in drugs and/or medical appliances and a host of other, less categorical healers.¹⁸ The greater part of primary care, however, is thought to have been administered within a domestic setting. For the most part, this was carried out by housewives, who were charged with 'the preservation and care of the family touching their health'.¹⁹

Almanacs were an important source of medical advice and information for both professional and lay healers. However, although almanacs contain a wealth of material, very few early modern scholars are familiar with the genre.

Therefore, in order to provide a context for this discussion, the first section of the article will briefly introduce almanacs. This will be followed by a review of the main marketing considerations of advertising and distribution. The former will be examined in section two, which begins with an overview of advertising in almanacs. A detailed examination of the types of medically related products and services advertised will be found in the third section. Distribution is the theme of the fourth section, followed by a summary of the role seventeenth century almanacs played in the growth of medical consumerism.

Almanacs

Almanacs were already a very old form of literature by the seventeenth century. Derek Parker believes that they can be traced back to the manuscript texts on lunar and planetary motion from the third century BC.²⁰ The actual term 'almanac' has been attributed to the Arabic word for calendar, which was brought into Spain by the Moors. Alternatively, it might have originated from the Latin 'manacus' or 'manadius', which refers to the circle in a sundial.²¹

One of the earliest developments during the Middle Ages was what became known as a 'clog almanac'. These were simple constructions made of sticks or rods marked by a series of notches and symbols, representing the lunar cycle and the Christian feasts.²² Manuscript almanacs were another early form, which were referred to as 'kalendaria' during the medieval period. These supplied important ecclesiastical information in addition to a calendar. During the fourteenth century, the friars John Somer and Nicholas of Lynn expanded these works by including information on eclipses, medical and other matters of interest.²³ Unlike the earlier versions written for clergymen, they were aimed to appeal to a wider audience of students and physicians.²⁴

The first printed almanac appeared in the fifteenth century. Johannes Gutenberg published it in 1448, eight years before his famous Bible. By the 1470s large numbers of almanacs were being printed in various countries on the Continent.²⁵ They proved to be particularly popular in Germany and the Netherlands.²⁶ Many of these almanacs were in a booklet form, while others appeared as broadsides, which were somewhat less in demand.²⁷

In England, however, the evolution of almanacs was much slower. Until the late sixteenth century, most English almanacs were translations of European ones.²⁸ It is thought, however, that English manuscript almanacs also continued to circulate alongside those from the Continent.²⁹ The Englishman Andrew Boorde had his first almanac printed around 1537.³⁰ Shortly after this in 1557, The Worshipful Company of Stationers was founded, which eventually controlled English printing for nearly two hundred years.³¹ Almanacs began to appear in larger numbers during the 1560s, but began to flounder in the following decade.³² This pattern was halted in 1588 when Richard Watkins and James Roberts obtained the privilege of printing almanacs.³³

In 1603 James I passed on these monopolistic rights to the Stationers' Company.³⁴ The Company also obtained the right to print 'private prayers, prymer, psalters and psalmes in English or Latin'. Together, these works became known as the highly profitable 'English Stock', a book-producing and book-wholesaling organisation run from Stationers' Hall.³⁵ Although other elements of the English Stock also sold in large numbers, almanacs were arguably the most profitable publication.³⁶

Most surviving almanacs were made up of two major sections. The core of the first section always consisted of a calendar marking upcoming astronomical and astrological events for the coming year. Generally, this would be presented in a monthly format over two adjoining pages. As one writer explained, every month would contain 'the Common aspects and configurations of the planets'.³⁷ These were often divided into two sections. On the left-hand side, every day was individually noted. Alongside these were listings for the time of 'the rising, southing and setting of the Planets'. These included the movements of the moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury and the sun.

On the right-hand side of the page, it was standard form to include a space for miscellaneous information. Depending on the author, it might be left blank to use for personal notes, although some pre-printed the space with variety of useful information. In 1697 John Gadbury proclaimed that 'my Monthly Pages of this Year [will] present you with the Genitures of XII Foreign PHYSICIANS, and a like NUMBER of our own Nations, as FAMOUS'.³⁸ William Salmon used these sections to offer a selection of monthly medical recipes.³⁹

The second section of almanacs was generally called the 'prognostication'. This part usually contained material that was not very 'time-sensitive', such as medical information and advice. Joseph Blagrove, for example, offered the 'Time and Manner of curing Diseases by Sympathy and Antipathy, Rules for husbandry, dayly Predictions of the Weather, and many other Things beneficial for Phisitians and Young Students'.⁴⁰ Although there are some exceptions, advertisements tended to be placed on the last page or two of the prognostication.

Although the term 'marketing' did not exist in the seventeenth century, I believe that the Stationers' Company approached the production of almanacs through a similar decision-making process. It is clear that different titles were written to appeal to readers with varying levels of literacy, wealth and sophistication. Marketing decisions were also influenced by other considerations. For example, although most almanacs were printed in London, many targeted specific, regional audiences. These included towns from Dover all the way up to Durham, making almanacs the first periodicals with national coverage. Other titles differentiated themselves by targeting specific occupational groups. Although several titles were written for 'country-men', others focused on chapmen, weavers, seamen, shepherds, farriers or constables. Readers who had strong religious convictions, or prejudices, could have

chosen to purchase almanacs intended for either a Protestant or Catholic audience.

As with modern periodicals, the ability to provide a diversified range of almanacs allowed the Stationers' Company to offer something of interest to most readers. The result of their success showed in the contemporary saying that almanacs were 'readier money than cake or ale'.⁴¹ The satirical almanac *Poor Robin* summed this up with truthful humour:

This is now the Twenty fifth Year since first I began to write Poor Robins Almanack,
 And if you will believe the Book-sellers, it hath been written well, whose Maxim
 is,
 The Author above all the rest,
 Whose Book sells most, doth write the best.⁴²

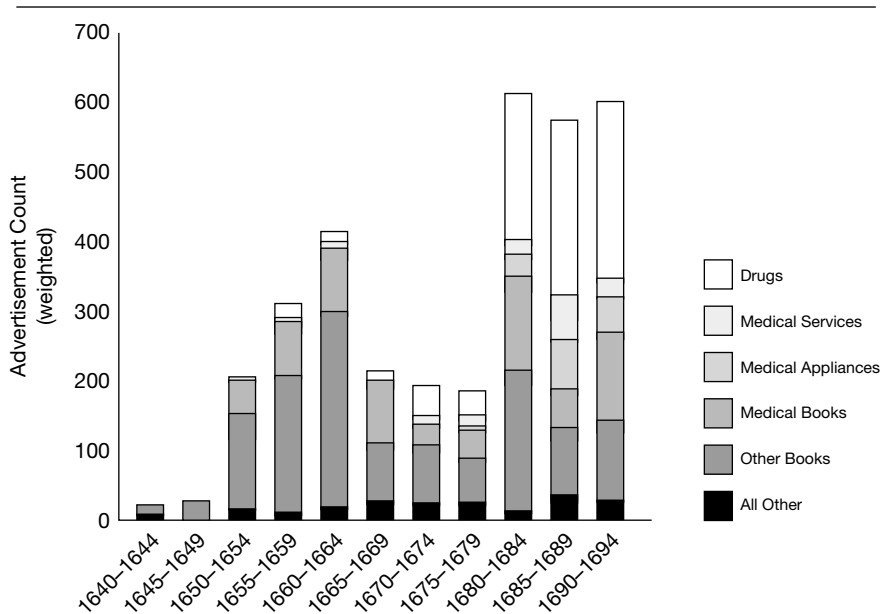
Advertisements in Almanacs

According to E. Bosanquet, the first advertisements in almanacs appeared in 1581. These consisted of allusions to books in the preface or dedicatory letter.⁴³ A similar style can be seen in almanacs printed during the early years of this study. For example, in 1647 John Booker recommended that his 'courteous readers' purchase a forthcoming book by William Lilly.⁴⁴ Two years later he suggested that they read a new book written by 'my loving friends Vincent Wing and William Leybourn'.⁴⁵

Such advertisements were typical of the style found in contemporary newsbooks. These early 'newsletters' tended to consist of news sandwiched between personal and business letters.⁴⁶ Joad Raymond has suggested that publishers began to promote their own books as a way of filling empty spaces.⁴⁷ By the 1640s, regular editions began to carry one or two advertisements a week.⁴⁸ *The Publick Adviser* existed for the sole purpose of printing advertisements. It was written for 'all persons that are in any way concerned in matter of Buying and Selling, or in any kind of Employment, or dealings whatsoever'.⁴⁹ In the period following the interregnum, prospering newspapers became increasingly popular as vehicles for advertisements.⁵⁰

The same held true for almanacs, which had a great advantage over newspapers. Although both publications were cheap, the almanac had a much longer life span. Advertisements in a newspaper might only be seen once or twice before it was discarded. An almanac, however, would remain in use for an entire year. This meant that individual advertisements might be seen a number of times by the same reader, as well as by other users of the almanac. I believe that this was an important tool in creating both demand and brand awareness for new medical products.

As advertisements continued to grow in number, they also appeared to rise in importance. This is illustrated by the implementation of a separate section in almanacs devoted to promotional pieces. Generally, as has been noted,



	1640-1644	1645-1649	1650-1654	1655-1659	1660-1664	1665-1669	1670-1674	1675-1679	1680-1684	1685-1689	1690-1694	1695-1699	Total
Drugs	2	0	0	27	25	15	32	32	202	253	240	349	1177
Medical Services	0	0	3	8	10	1	15	19	29	63	44	27	220
Medical Appliances	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	7	39	56	45	35	184
Medical Books	2	0	54	75	87	80	38	52	119	49	98	147	801
Other Books	8	25	139	206	305	100	93	64	233	124	157	145	1597
All Other	8	2	22	18	23	33	31	32	15	42	35	49	311
Sample	69	57	99	131	116	111	114	136	144	121	139	132	1369

Note: Due to the differing sample sizes for each interval, the advertisements from each five-year period have been weighted in order to provide an equal basis for comparison. Similarly, the year 1700 was dropped to provide equal five-year segments, reducing the sample size for this chart from 1,392 to 1,369.

Chart 1 Advertisements in Almanacs by Type

this would appear on either the very last, or the two final pages of the publication. In 1654, John Booker introduced this by saying ‘I am entreated to give notice’, followed by references for globes and books for sale.⁵¹ The most common type of medical advertisement was for vernacular medical books. These were followed by advertisements for proprietary medicines and medical services.⁵²

My research has shown that there were three distinct phases in medical advertising in almanacs. The first period could be said to have run from approximately 1640 to 1665. As Chart 1 indicates, there was an almost total absence of advertisements in the first decade of this study. Presumably, this was related to the economic depression in 1641–42.⁵³ The toll of years of

civil war resulted in reduced manufacturing and trade, compounded by a series of poor crop yields.⁵⁴ As a result, there would have been few consumer products to advertise and little disposable income available to pay for them.

During the interregnum, however, a dramatic rise in advertisements can be seen. The most heavily promoted items during this period were books, a trend which continued through most of this study. Between 1650 and 1654, advertisements for proprietary drugs are almost non-existent, although they show a slight rise in the following five-year period. Conversely, advertisements for what I have called ‘medical services and appliances’ began to make their first appearance in the 1650s. The former included medical services offered either by the almanac writer, or other healers. Often, they advertised the availability of consultations for general health problems, although there were also practitioners who could advise on specific illnesses or disabilities. More specialised services were also available, which included the fitting of eyeglasses, trusses or glass eyeballs.

The second major period dates from approximately 1665 to 1679. This was represented by a significant decrease in the numbers of advertisements, followed by a decade of very little change. This may, in part, be linked to the Great Fire of 1666, which seriously affected both industry and retail sales in the capital.

In addition to many other consumer goods, almanacs and a number of products that they advertised were either produced or sold in London. As Samuel Pepys reported on 26 September 1666:

I hear the great loss of books in St. Paul’s churchyard, and at their [Stationers’ Company] hall also – which they value at about 150000 [pounds]; some book-sellers being wholly undone.⁵⁵

The last two decades of the century represent the third distinct period in seventeenth-century advertising in almanacs. In general terms, this was a time of rapid expansion in the manufacturing of cheap consumer goods, such as pottery or Midlands hardware.⁵⁶ A range of non-essential or luxury items also became increasingly available, such as ribbons, lace and vegetable dyes.⁵⁷ In almanacs, proprietary medicines began to be advertised in ever-larger numbers.

Books, however, were the most frequently advertised consumer items in almanacs. This is hardly surprising in light of the vast quantities being published. David Cressy has estimated that an average of two hundred titles were printed every year between 1576 and 1640. Between 1640 and 1660 George Thomason was able to collect an average of 680 books and pamphlets a year.⁵⁸ He purchased his first medical book in 1649, and ended up with seventy-seven medical works in English, and ten in Latin.⁵⁹

The second most widely advertised products were commercialised medicines. This factor illustrates a major shift from the home to the marketplace in the means of securing remedies. Of course, previously, not all ingredients

could be produced at home, and some had to be purchased at a market, fair or a retail shop. This was particularly true for exotic materials from the New World, which could only be obtained from an apothecary. In addition, it had been a longstanding tradition for charlatans, mountebanks or quacks to peddle drugs as part of shows or entertainments.⁶⁰ The major difference in the new proprietary drugs is that they were identified by what would now be called a ‘brand name’.

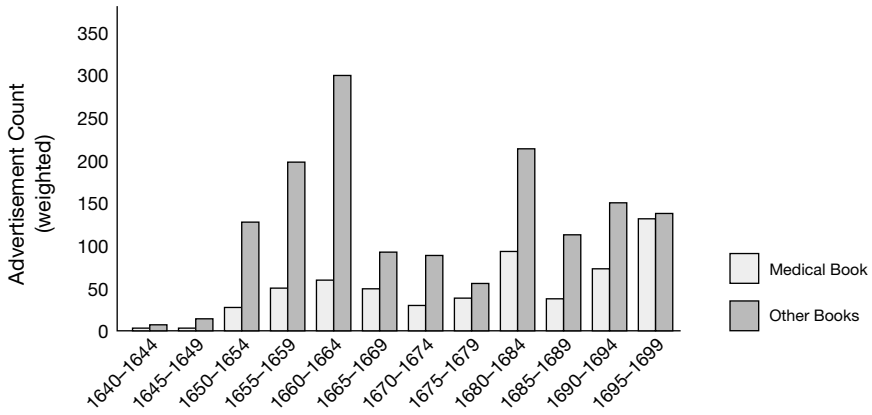
The modern definition of branding refers to an item being endowed with an individual identity and a corresponding ‘brand image’.⁶¹ Seventeenth-century brand names, which usually included the name of the producer, were permanently linked with the medical product.⁶² For example, ‘Spirit of Scurvy Grass’ was an extremely popular proprietary drug. It was said to be effective against scurvy, dropsy, stone, consumption, aches, and lameness of the limbs, agues, fevers and griping of the guts.⁶³ Judging by the numbers of advertisements for certain products, there were several well known, recognisable brand names. These included ‘Bateman’s Scurvy Grass’, ‘Hooker’s Scurvy Grass’, ‘Pordage’s Scurvy Grass’ or ‘Russell’s Spirit of Scurvy Grass’. It seems likely that consumers would have familiarly thought about and referred to such potions as ‘Hooker’s’, ‘Pordage’s’ or ‘Russell’s’.

Medical services and supplies made up the third category of goods advertised most often in almanacs. Many of these were offers for medical or astrological consultations. Mr Cook of Waltham Abbey claimed to be a physician able to cure the King’s Evil, ‘not by any physical Application, but by means so innocent and harmless, that the youngest as well as older, may with Safety take it’.⁶⁴ Another practitioner offered his services, as well as those of his household. If necessary, he was prepared to welcome those who required a period of nursing, at his ‘large House in a good Air’.⁶⁵ Those who simply wanted to purchase remedies could visit the almanac writer Lancelot Coelson to provide the ‘Peculiar Medicines I daily prepare, and have ready by me for the Cure of most Diseases’.⁶⁶

Analysis of Medical Advertisements

Because of their national distribution, the advertisements in almanacs would have been seen by a vast number of people. In modern marketing terms, they would have been an ideal medium for promoting other printed works. As Chart 2 shows, almanac readers were exposed to large numbers of advertisements for books.

The first major rise in the 1650s mirrored the growth in publishing following years of war. This included a number of new periodicals, many of which carried advertisements for various types of printed works.⁶⁷ The highest number of advertisements for books appeared between 1660 and 1665. As previously mentioned, the Great Fire caused severe problems for London



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Medical Books	2	0	54	75	87	80	38	52	119	49	98	147	801
Other Books	8	25	139	206	305	100	93	64	233	124	157	145	1597
Sample	69	57	99	131	116	111	114	136	144	121	139	132	1369

Chart 2 Book Advertisements in Almanacs

printers. As normality returned to the capital, the numbers of advertisements for books rose once again.

Many vernacular medical books were written by almanac writers. One of the best known authors was William Lilly, who produced *Christian Astrology* in 1647. It promised to provide ‘a most easie Introduction to the whole Art of Astrology’, with detailed information about ‘Health [and] Sicknesse’.⁶⁸ Vincent Wing was the author of an advertised book ‘containing a new, accurate & entire piece of Astronomie, wherein that mysterious Science is succinctly treated of in the English tongue’.⁶⁹ Another almanac writer, William Andrews, wrote *The Astrological Phisitian – how to discover and find out the qualities and nature of a disease by the Sublime Art of Astrology*.⁷⁰ The most prolific author, however, was William Salmon, who regularly advertised between twelve and eighteen of his own medical works.⁷¹

Some almanac writers made use of what modern advertising firms call ‘testimonials’. These appeared in the form of personal endorsements, as with George Wharton’s recommendation for some: ‘Books worth buying, as being Learned, Honest and Useful’.⁷² The well-known astrologer, translator and compiler of medical books, Nicholas Culpeper, gave his stamp of approval to:

A Book entitled The Nobility of Astrology, demonstrated by the purity of its first Principles, shewing the Reasons and Grounds on which Astrology is fabricated, discoursed by way of Proposition, the Questions of all universal Positions there proposed with many particular Grounds of the Art and the Reasons.⁷³

By the following decade, such niceties as personal testimonials had all but disappeared. Advertisements began to be presented more succinctly, usually without any comments on the content. It seems likely that this was a ploy to cut the space needed for advertisements for books to a minimum. Some titles, such as *A Treatise of the Scurvy* or *A Treatise of Consumptions* did not really require any further explanation.⁷⁴ On the other hand, perhaps the Stationers' Company simply wished to provide more room for praising the virtues of the large numbers of patent drugs that began to appear.

Anyone could patent a medicine as long as it was a new formula, and they did not have to prove that it worked.⁷⁵ Producers were also free to make any claims that they chose about the effectiveness of their products. As might be expected, the majority of advertisements for patent drugs in almanacs were extremely enthusiastic about their virtues. William Salmon claimed that 'Dr. Salmon's Pilulae Mirabiles, or Wonderful Pills' were 'the most powerful Cathartick in the World'. His 'Cordial Pill' was the 'greatest and most excellent Preparation of all the Opiats yet invented'.⁷⁶ John Partridge offered his 'safest, speediest, and surest Cure for the Gonorrhoea' which consisted of a parcel containing both 'Antivenereal Pills, and a Diuretick and Diaphoretick Spirit'.⁷⁷ He promised readers that:

I do not bring to thee a Bundle of Medicines over-charged with names and Unintelligible Words: Nor do I pretend them to be Panacea's, or products for the Universal Solvent ... but I present thee here with a few safe and familiar. Things that are both cheap and easy.⁷⁸

The almanac writer Daniel Woodward produced an entire range of medicines, including family pills, cordial pills, pills for the cure of claps, elixir salutis and an unguent to kill worms. The advertisements in his almanacs promised that readers who consulted him in person would find even more medicines, 'which Names and Virtues are not here inserted'.⁷⁹ According to Woodward, all of these products were 'cheap, safe and approved help for most Diseases happening to Man, Woman or Child'.⁸⁰ The instruction pamphlet that accompanied these drugs further extolled their virtues:

... whose Operations are so wonderful and effectual, that they have not their equal, in Rooting out and Curing Chronical and the most difficult Distempers: for which these Medicines may be term'd Universal, being suited to all Ages, Humours, Sexes and Constitutions, and may be with safety exhibited to all Persons where Purgation is required.⁸¹

The longest surviving nostrum was called 'Daffy's Elixir', which began to appear in almanacs around 1660, and thrived until at least the 1920s.⁸² Although advertisements for the product only appear in a handful of almanacs in this study, a pamphlet was also produced to accompany it.⁸³ Anthony Daffy claimed that his 'Elixir Salutis' was a 'most excellent Preservative of Man-kind'. It was said to cure a host of diseases ranging

from the gout, through to ‘languishing and melancholy, scurvy, dropsy and fits of the Mother’.⁸⁴

This product was so popular that counterfeit versions of it were produced in private households. One late seventeenth-century manuscript ‘boke of physick’ provided the following instructions ‘to make Dafyes Elixir’ :

Take 3 quarts of aqua vitae of the second stilling of rubarb and sena 3 ounces in an ounce of coriande seed of saffran half a dram campanae powder, 2 drumms of Ligorish 2 ounce of coriander seeds 2 pounds of raisons of the sone stoned the Ligorish and rubarb sliced the sena and seed brused, put it all into the 3 quarts of aqua vitae let it stand to gather form a week stirring sometimes, then strain it, through a fine cloth, squees the cloth hard, into thes engredients put 3 quarts more the licor, lett it stand a week as the former strain it through a brown paper through a funnel stir it every day when it is first made bin it over with a bladder.⁸⁵

Interestingly, this was still ‘a favourite quack medicine’ in the 1870s, when the recipe appeared in *The Family Doctor*. Although the instructions had been simplified somewhat, the ingredients had changed very little over two hundred years. The late-nineteenth-century version consisted of:

Senna leaves, 5 ounces; Guaiacum shavings, dried Elecampane Root, Aniseeds, Corianders, Caraways, and Liquorice Root, and according to some, red Sanders wood, of each 2½ ounces; stoned Raisins, 8 ounces; Proof Spirit, 6 pounds: macerated for a fortnight and filter [ed].⁸⁶

The most frequently advertised medicine, however, was ‘Spirits of Scurvy Grass’. There were two types of scurvygrass, either the English variety, which grew by the sea, or the Dutch, which was said to be ‘frequent in gardens’.⁸⁷ For over forty years one author suggested that readers purge with ‘scurvy grass ale’ in May. Between the 1650s and 1684, the text makes no references to using a branded product. However, in 1684, 1687 and 1692 advertisements for Robert Bateman’s Scurvy Grass appeared in conjunction with Perkins’ standard advice.⁸⁸ There were a number of competing brands, with each of the makers swearing that every other brand was counterfeit. The most frequently advertised product was made by Robert Bateman who claimed that he had the recipe for:

Those highly approved and only true Spirits of Scurvy Grass, both Plain and Golden, famous for their admirable Cures in the Scurvey, Dropsie and several other general Distempers, [and they] are exactly and faithfully prepar’d and sold by the first Author, Robert Bateman ... These are the true Spirits notwithstanding all the late pretenders thereunto: Therefore let all persons beware they are not cheated with those upstarts.⁸⁹

Clarke’s Scurvy Compound also claimed exclusivity for:

The true Essential Spirits of Scurvy-Grass Compound, that most Nobel Medicine, so famous throughout the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, and other Nations beyond the Seas, for removing all cold Distempers of the stomach, and

especially for its miraculous Virtue in Curing the Scurvy, are faithfully prepared and sold by Henry Clarke the first and only author.⁹⁰

Dr Pordage was another advertiser who asserted the he was ‘the first author of the only true spirit of scurvy grass’. His advertisements stated that he sold this remedy ‘for the general good, at 6 d per Glass in London, and 8 d in the country’.⁹¹ This presumably appealed to money-conscious consumers more than the shilling charged for the Bateman brand during the same period.⁹² The best value, however, was the one that offered to return the purchasers’ money if they did not like the product. George Parker, who not only wrote almanacs, but also marketed his own formula, offered this. Parker’s Elixir of Scurvy Grass was promoted as being ‘fit for the Closet of any Physician’.⁹³

Many of these remedies were advertised over a long period of time. Although there is no direct evidence of consumption, the fact that so many brands prospered suggested sizeable and steady sales.⁹⁴ Buckworth’s Lozenges appeared in almanacs a total of sixty-four times, between 1656 and 1700. It seems that the number of afflictions they could cure increased during this time. In 1657 the advertisement promised that ‘Excellent Lozenges, or Pectrals approved of for the cure of all diseases of the Lungs, and a great antidote against the Plague, are made by Mr Edmund Buckworth at his house’.⁹⁵ Two years later, the claims had grown to ‘the cure of Consumptions, Coughs, Catharrs, Astma’s, Hoarsnesse and all other Diseases incident to the Lungs, and a soveraign Antidote against the Plague, and all other contagious Diseases, and obstructions of the stomach.’⁹⁶ Interestingly, in the year following the great plague of 1665 Buckworth’s Lozenges are not advertised at all, perhaps because they seemed to be ineffective when put to the test of an epidemic.

By purchasing these drugs, readers were obtaining a medicine that in theory should have always contained the same unadulterated ingredients in identical amounts. The two main ways purchasers could be sure of obtaining the real thing was through a mixture of package design, and distribution points. As modern marketing methods still show, the presentation of a product can add to its perceived value.⁹⁷ Many almanac writers used their seal for decoration, and to show that it had not been tampered with.⁹⁸

Such methods were intended ‘to prevent the Designs of some Pretenders, who sell about the City their Counterfeit ware, to the disparagement of the said Gentleman, and the Great abuse of the people’.⁹⁹ However, as William Salmon angrily noted, there was no guarantee that products would not be reproduced.

Whereas one Hollier Publishes and pretends to sell Salmon’s Family Pills, he assumes my Name, Effigies and Seal, doing so without my Privilege, Allowance, Order or Consent (to my great Prejudice and Damages).¹⁰⁰

Many advertisements promised that the new patent drugs were also more economical than older remedies. Although sold in relatively large quantities,

it was claimed that a proprietary medication ‘will retain its Vertues several Years’.¹⁰¹ Many nostrums also claimed to be suitable for treating a host of different symptoms. This meant that readers would be prepared for a host of medical emergencies. In 1672, readers were offered the chance to buy ‘pills against all diseases’. These were called ‘Pilu Alnomenes Morbos’ and were sold by the small bottle or in a larger box. The former cost three shillings, and the latter, holding eighty pills, cost six shillings.¹⁰² This advertisement does not specify how many pills were to be taken at a time, or how often. However, other patent pills advised readers to ‘use discretion in the Dose, and take as the Body can bear, or Disease require them’.¹⁰³ Another recommended that they could be administered up to four times daily, down to once every third or fourth day.¹⁰⁴

Such diverse statements make it difficult to compare the cost of such remedies with non-proprietary drugs. It is possible that proprietary drugs that were made in large quantities would be cheaper than individually prepared prescriptions. However, homemade medicines would have been more economical than either of these. In many cases, this appeared to have been true even when individual ingredients had to be purchased. For example, according to *The Family-Physician and the House-Apothecary*, ‘Aqua Epidemica, or the London Plague-Water’ was sold by apothecaries for between three shillings and six pence and four shillings a pint. If made at home, the total cost would come to seven pence a pint.¹⁰⁵ Of course, special prescriptions prepared by an apothecary would have been even more expensive. The Earl of Bedford’s servants were given drugs prepared by a local apothecary in the 1670s. These items also appear rather expensive at three shillings for just three doses of cordial pills or cordial juleps. A box of stomach pills also went for three shillings, and a box of purging pills only slightly cheaper at two shillings.¹⁰⁶

Almanacs also contained a number of advertisements for what I have called ‘medical appliances’. These included one advertisement for false teeth, seventeen for artificial eyeballs and the same number for spectacles. John Wads offered to produce and ‘set in’ authentic-looking artificial teeth. He boasted that they were so ‘exact that they may be eat upon, and not discovered by the nicest Observor’.¹⁰⁷ William Boyse claimed that he made a product ‘the like was never seen in England’. His speciality was making artificial eyeballs:

At the Sign of the Golden Griffin in Bell-Savage-Yard on Ludgate-Hill liveth William Boyse, the only English Operator in Glass, and the most expert in making Artificial Eyes, so exact as not to be distinguished from Natural, they are made of Enamel, with Colour mixt of the Same, without either Paint or Lead, worn with much ease, and so curious that they have the Motion of the Natural Eye, being exactly made to the Colour and fineness of he same, which renders them very ornamental and Commodious.¹⁰⁸

Boyse's advertisements appeared seventeen times between 1681 and 1698, in almanacs written by William Lilly, Henry Coley, John Partridge and William Turner.

Help was also available for those who did not need Boyse's services, but those of a spectacle maker. The use of spherical lenses, concave for short sight and convex for long-sight, was fairly common in the second half of the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁹ Unlike modern spectacles, they were constructed without hinged supports over the ears. Instead, they were meant to grip the nose, or to be made as a pince nez that could be gripped by a strong linking bar.¹¹⁰ John Yarwell promised to make 'spectacles for most sights and ages'. He claimed that these eyeglasses were 'wrought to the greatest Perfection' and that they had even been 'approved of by the Royal Society'.¹¹¹ John Marshall could not make that same claim, although he promised 'very neat Leather Frames for Spectacles, which are not subject to break as Horn or Tortois Shell'.¹¹²

The most widely advertised types of medical appliances were trusses. There were two main providers, and although it would have been difficult to prove the superiority of one against another, the advertisements still attempted to do so. John Reeve boasted in 1681 that payment would only be due two months after the patient was cured.¹¹³ In that same year, the widow of Rowland Pippin claimed that she was just as skilled in making trusses as her late son and husband had been.¹¹⁴ This was not an unusual boast, as it was not only common for women to carry on their late husband's trade, but was in fact obligatory for them to see existing apprentices through their training, or to turn them over to another master.¹¹⁵ R. Collins claimed to be 'a Traveller famous in Germany and other Countreys' for making trusses.¹¹⁶ He bragged that there were:

None such made in England, as these be found by Experience, he [Collins] helps those at a distance, as well with Directions, as those in London; and helps those that cannot hold their Water, or bearing down in the Privy-Parts.¹¹⁷

Distribution

Some drugs appear to have been produced on a very small scale, as they were only available from the producer's home.¹¹⁸ Most medicines advertised in almanacs, however, could be purchased from many different outlets, such as 'all other usual places appointed for Sale in London and elsewhere'.¹¹⁹ These included some traditional methods of selling goods, as well as various types of retail outlets. One producer suggested that consumers acquire his drugs 'by engaging the Carriers who come from their respective Countreys, or some of their Friends in Town, to come to me for them'.¹²⁰ Alternatively, readers could send an order to London, and obtain the drugs via the postal service.¹²¹

Commercial remedies were often sold by the same vendors offering almanacs, such as chapmen, or hawkers.¹²² In the 1640s, it has been estimated that there were at least three hundred street hawkers in London.¹²³ Fairs, which were the most traditional forum for purchasing consumer goods, were also important distribution points for nostrums.¹²⁴ Many almanacs gave notice of such forthcoming events. In 1678, readers were advised of 'A Fair at Ickewell-Green in the Parish of North-hall in the County of Bedford', where they could buy 'all manner of Cattel and all sorts of other goods'.¹²⁵ Cattle could also be purchased in the fields 'between Stonehenge and Great Amesbury in the County of Wilts'.¹²⁶ This was called the 'Countess-fair' and also offered 'all other goods and merchandises whatsoever'.¹²⁷

Many of the commercialised medicines could also be purchased in a variety of different shops. In 1670, 'The Elixir Proprietatis could only be had' at one of nine pubs or a stationer's shop in London.¹²⁸ Over the next twelve years, it appears that the marketing strategy changed significantly. Only one pub carried the medicine, while five stationers, and three unspecified shops also sold it.¹²⁹ These last three may have been bookshops, which were known for selling other items. For example, a customer could purchase both writing ink and 'Doctor Turners most approved Dentrifices' in Thomas Rook's London shop.¹³⁰

It appears that drinking houses were also popular venues for obtaining proprietary drugs. Mrs. Elizabeth Snart ran a coffeehouse where she sold her own version of Elixir Proprietatis.¹³¹ As well as using two booksellers, Lancelot Coelson also used an alehouse, an inn and 'a strong water house' to distribute his pills.¹³² Maynard's Pectoral Lozenges were available from this same pub, called the Grey-hound. In addition, the lozenges were available from 'an Apothecaries shop' in White-cross Street.¹³³ Other proprietary potions were distributed through stationers' shops, such as Mr. Playford's in the Temple or at Mr. Smith's at the Elephant and Castle near Temple-Bar.¹³⁴

Many almanacs provided readers with information on where to purchase these medicines in the provinces. Daniel Woodward made sure that his cordial pills were accessible 'for the meaner sort of People' by distributing them to regional sellers. They could be purchased:

In Yarmouth by Samuel Fenn Grocer, in Guildford by Mr Thomas Thetcher coach harness maker, In Yeavel by Mr Rixon girt web maker, in Beckles by Mrs Carter, in Pakersfield by Mr Poper grocer, in Burntwood by Mr Will Penn Baker, In Debtford the Lower, by Nurse Norberry, in Bristol by Mr John Hames, Horner, and by Mr Anthony Patch at his shop.¹³⁵

A number of other medicines were also distributed nation-wide. Although Bateman's Scurvy Grass could be purchased at the site of production in London, it was also available in 'most eminent Towns in the Country'.¹³⁶ The same held true for Russell's Spirit of Scurvy Grass, found at 'his House at the Blew Posts against Grays-Inn, Holborn, and in most great market Towns'.¹³⁷ John Piercy's lozenges for the cure of 'Consumptions, Coughs, Catarrhs,

Astmaes, Tiffick, Colds old and new' were available in a variety of urban and rural outlets. In London, they were sold at ten different pubs. They could also be purchased from:

Mr. Brocas in Exeter, Mr. Franklin in Norwich, Mr. Tuttle in Yarmouth, Mr. Jones in Worcester, Mr. Thomas in Bristol, Mr. Davis in Oxford, Mrs. Plummer in St. Edmonds-bury and Mrs. Williams in Lincoln.¹³⁸

Conclusion

The development of proprietary medicines had a profound effect on the 'dosing habits' of English consumers.¹³⁹ Pre-packaged, brand drugs were a novel concept for a people who had spent centuries either preparing potions at home, or having them made to order. As Roy Porter has documented, commercialised remedies enjoyed a mercurial rise in popularity during the eighteenth century. The demand was fuelled by nation-wide advertising that played on the fears of a hypochondriacal public. As a result, their distribution and sale grew dramatically.¹⁴⁰ Roy Porter has even suggested that the national taste for proprietary drugs resulted in domestic medicine chests that make modern ones appear spartan.¹⁴¹

This article has argued that the foundations of this medical materialism have not been, but should be attributed to the seventeenth century. The bulk of the evidence for this conclusion was supplied by seventeenth-century almanacs. Although little used by modern academics, almanacs contain a wealth of material on seventeenth-century life. Unlike many types of early modern sources these publications have survived in large numbers over a long period of time. Almanacs were the most profitable publication produced under the management of the Stationers' Company. Every aspect of their production from choice of author, to length and content was tightly controlled in order to maximise their sale. In modern terms, it could be said that the Company employed a clever 'marketing strategy' to appeal to different segments of the public. The fact that 72.3% of all almanacs contained medical material shows that there was a strong demand for its inclusion.

This also holds true for the large and growing number of advertisements for medical products. Their inclusion suggests that their presence pleased the Stationers' and that their content was amenable to their readers. The total number of advertisements in almanacs grew from an average of one for every three almanacs in the period from 1640 to 1644 to almost eleven advertisements per almanac for the period from 1695 to 1699. From about 1680 onwards this growth can be attributed almost entirely to drug advertisements.

Many of these products appeared in almanacs for several decades, showing their success with consumers. The on-going advertisements for such concoctions suggests that either they actually were effective or perceived to be, or

else that their publicity was managing to convince people that they were. What else could explain the fact that the owner of a seventeenth-century household book would have ‘pirated’ a copy of the recipe for ‘Daffy’s Elixir’?¹⁴² Or that the medicine itself would have survived into the early twentieth century?¹⁴³ Perhaps the high percentage of alcohol or opiates in many products made people forget their troubles.¹⁴⁴ In other cases, the placebo effect may have been at work. If people believed that their medications would work, they may actually have done so.¹⁴⁵

By purchasing these drugs, readers were obtaining a medicine that in theory should always contain the same unadulterated ingredients in identical amounts. The two main ways purchasers could be sure of obtaining the real thing was through a mixture of package design, and distribution points. As modern marketing methods still show, the presentation of a product can add to its perceived value.¹⁴⁶

I believe that the seventeenth century should be recognised as a pivotal stage in the evolution of proprietary medicines. It was the period when consumers were introduced to the concept of branded, pre-packaged nostrums. This was a new concept that infringed on the way medicines had been produced and/or purchased, for centuries. Through continual exposure to advertisements in almanacs for these items, many had become household names well before the start of the Georgian period. As this article has shown, the growing acceptance, popularity and subsequent demand for proprietary medicines in the seventeenth century changed the face of the English medical marketplace forever.

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Notes

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- 4 See, for example, R. Porter, *Health for Sale: Quackery in England 1660–1850* (Manchester, 1989); R. Porter, ‘Civilisation and Disease: Medical Ideology in the

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 - 13 There are several reasons why some surviving almanacs have not been used in this study. Many were inaccessible for various reasons, such as not being microfilmed or reproduced on the Internet. Others were either in fragments, or deemed too fragile to be handled.
 - 1 For further information, see: L. Curth, ‘The Medical Content of English Almanacs 1640–1700’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 2001.
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 - 16 H. Cook, *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart London* (London, 1986), Chapter One; R. Porter, *Health for Sale*; A. Wear, ‘The Popularization of Medicine in Early Modern England’ in R. Porter (ed.), *The Popularization of Medicine 1650–1850* (London, 1992), p. 17; A. W. Sloan, *English Medicine in the Seventeenth Century* (Durham, N.C., 1996).
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