

FEMALE PILLS AND THE REPUTATION OF IRON AS AN ABORTIFACIENT

by

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“FEMALE PILLS” or other internal medicines for “complaints peculiar to females” formed a small but distinct group among the medicines advertised in eighteenth-century newspapers. There were, for instance, six such preparations found in a sample of Bath newspapers in the second half of the eighteenth century and one of them, Hooper’s Female Pills, was the fourth most frequently advertised among the 302 medicines mentioned in the sample.¹ Similarly, two samples of Bristol newspapers taken from the beginning and the middle of the nineteenth century (1802 to 1810, and 1850 to 1859)² between them contained advertisements for 318 medicines of which thirteen were offered purely for female use. The names of two suggest that they were probably advertised for other conditions on other occasions; one other was specifically for leucorrhoea, and another for women in childbed. The remaining medicines form the group now under consideration, and they were advertised primarily for menstrual disorders, in particular for “all obstructions and irregularities”, and often for associated general symptoms, sometimes with specific reference to the green sickness. The objects of this paper are to examine the female medicines which appeared in these samples of Bath and Bristol newspapers; to compare them, as far as the limited information allows, with the medicines of the regular practitioners; and to trace from other sources the developments in advertised female medicines towards the end of the nineteenth century and public reactions to them.

FEMALE MEDICINES IN THE NEWSPAPER SAMPLES OF 1744 TO 1859

1. *Pills and wafers*

Hooper’s Female Pills, as already mentioned, were frequently advertised in the eighteenth century, when they were offered for treatment of the general complaints of females and claimed to be the best medicine ever discovered for the green sickness. They have been discussed more fully elsewhere³ but the main point relevant in the

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¹ P. S. Brown, ‘Medicines advertised in eighteenth-century Bath newspapers’, *Med. Hist.*, 1976, 20: 152–168.

² *Bonner & Middleton’s Bristol Journal*, issues for 1802; *Bristol Gazette*, for 1804 (one issue missing); *Bristol Mercury*, 21 issues for 1807; *The Mirror: late Bonner & Middleton’s Bristol Journal*, for 1808; *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, for 1810 and 1850; *Bristol Times*, for 1851; *Bristol Gazette*, for 1852; *Clifton Chronicle*, for 1853; *Bristol Mercury*, for 1854; *Bristol Mirror*, for 1856; *Bristol Observer*, issues from 12 February 1859 to 4 February 1860.

³ Brown, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.

present context is that they probably included ferrous sulphate and carbonate as well as aloes and myrrh among their ingredients, some formulae suggesting that the normal dose contained therapeutically significant amounts of iron. Hooper's Pills survived into the twentieth century, part of the reason for their success being that they were initially marketed by two of the leading distributors of proprietary medicines, the bookseller and publisher, John Newbery, and the Diceys.⁴

Welch's Female Pills, which also appeared in the eighteenth century and persisted until the middle of the twentieth, had several other features in common with Hooper's Pills. An advertisement in 1790, headed "Female Obstructions", announced that the efficacy of Welch's Pills had been "fully established wherever they have been tried, in complaints peculiar to Virgins, their effects being to remove obstructions, correct bad digestion, and create an appetite."⁵ They were also said to be useful for stomach pains, shortness of breath and headaches, as well as being beneficial when taken by women a few weeks after childbirth. The pills were sold wholesale and retail by G. Kearsley of Fleet Street, London,⁶ and in 1804, when they were advertised for "the Green Sickness and other Disorders incident to Young Females", the address was given as No. 46 Fleet Street.⁷ The distributor of this medicine therefore appears to be the Kearsley listed by Pendred as a bookseller at this address in 1785 and the George Kearsley who published numerous works, including Kearsley's *Arms of the peers and peeresses of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, at Dr. Johnson's Head, No. 46, Fleet Street, in 1788.⁸ George Kearsley was not as well known as John Newbery but it seems that he too combined the book business with dealing in at least one medicine. He may have been dead by 1804 when testimonials published in advertisements were addressed to Mrs. Kearsley.⁹ Subsequently the sale of Welch's Pills appeared under the name of C. and G. Kearsley¹⁰ and, although the same address was being used for this purpose in 1884,¹¹ no Kearsley appeared as a London bookseller or publisher in a directory of 1855.¹²

The advertisements in the newspapers sampled give no clues about the identity of the presumed originator of Welch's Pills, but a Mrs. Smithers, who advertised Widow Welch's Pills in the Bristol papers in the 1850s, claimed to be the granddaughter of the late Widow Welch and the "only real Proprietor and Possessor of the

⁴ For Newbery see *Dictionary of national biography*, and Charles Welsh, *A bookseller of the last century*, London, Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1885. For Dicey, see Brown, op. cit., note 1 above.

⁵ *Bath Chronicle*, 24 June 1790.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1799.

⁷ *Bristol Gazette*, 29 March 1804.

⁸ J. Pendred, *The London and country printers, booksellers and stationers vade mecum*, 1785; reprinted 1955, edited by G. Pollard, London, Bibliographical Society; *Books lately published by G. Kearsley at Doctor Johnson's Head, No 46 Fleet-Street, London*, London, 1788; *Bath Chronicle*, 18 March 1790; *Bristol Gazette*, 16 August 1804.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 May 1804.

¹⁰ "The composition of certain secret remedies; "Female medicines"', *Br. med. J.*, 1907, ii: 1653-1658; *Martindale's extra pharmacopoeia*, 23rd ed., London, Pharmaceutical Press, 1955, vol. 2, p. 1422.

¹¹ George Griffenhagen, *Medicine tax stamps worldwide*, Milwaukee, American Topical Association 1971.

¹² *Hodson's Booksellers, publishers and stationers directory, 1855*, Oxford, Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1972.

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Recipe.”¹³ Advertisements suggesting contested claims for the proprietary rights to well-known medicines were common, occurring for instance with Anderson’s Scots Pills,¹⁴ Dalby’s Carminative,¹⁵ and Gowland’s Lotion.¹⁶ Perhaps the problem was resolved in the present case as, in the twentieth century, C. and G. Kearsley referred to their product as Kearsley’s Original Widow Welch’s Female Pills.¹⁷ The main claim of their advertising literature was still that the pills were “a certain remedy for removing the obstructions to which Young Women are so frequently subject at puberty”,¹⁸ and Mrs. Smithers had emphasized the same point, recommending “mothers, guardians, managers of schools, and all those who have the care of females at an early age, never to be without this useful Medicine”.¹⁹

Analyses of the composition of many proprietary medicines were published in the nineteenth century but the sources usually rich in such recipes are silent on the subject of Welch’s Pills. In 1907, the Kearsleys’ pills, which were presumably based on the earlier recipe, were said to contain ferrous sulphate, representing about 29 mg of iron in each pill, the daily dose being three or four pills.²⁰ The next largest ingredient was liquorice and they also contained turmeric and sulphur.

Fuller’s Female Benedictine Pills were advertised in Bristol newspapers in 1808²¹ and are mentioned next because they are the only other female pill appearing in the sample for which a probable composition is known. The advertisement simply listed the pills without further explanation but they were sufficiently well known for formulae to be published by Gray in 1818 under the title of *Pilulae benedictae* and by Penn in 1822, when they were identified as *Pilulae benedict. fulleri*.²² Both formulae show hydrated ferrous sulphate as forming about thirty-seven per cent by weight of the pill and aloes about twenty-five per cent. There were several lesser ingredients of which senna was present in the greatest amount. Gray described the pills as emmenagogue and gave the dose as 5 to 15 gr, i.e. about 24 to 72 mg of iron. In the twentieth century, Horton’s Benedict Pills were on sale and were said to contain about eighteen per cent by weight of hydrated ferrous sulphate, as well as aloes and powdered ginger.²³

Hooper’s, Welch’s, and Fuller’s Benedictine Pills appear from the limited evidence available to have been basically similar in composition. Each probably contained iron in therapeutically useful amounts and in a suitable form, though the quality of the products may have varied, and Hooper’s Pills have been reported on occasions to pass unabsorbed through the intestinal tract.²⁴ Each also appears to have contained

¹³ *Bristol Mercury*, 7 January 1854.

¹⁴ *Bath Chronicle*, 18 March 1790, 8 April 1790, 11 November 1790.

¹⁵ *Bath Journal*, 5 March 1798, 5 November 1798.

¹⁶ *Bath Chronicle*, 19 August 1790, 23 December 1790.

¹⁷ *Martindale’s extra pharmacopoeia*, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 1422.

¹⁸ ‘The composition of certain secret remedies’, op. cit., note 10 above.

¹⁹ *Bristol Mercury*, 7 January 1854.

²⁰ ‘The composition of certain secret remedies’, op. cit., note 10 above.

²¹ *Bristol Mirror*, 24 September 1808.

²² S. F. Gray, *A supplement to the pharmacopoeias*, London, Thomas & George Underwood, 1818, p. 301; Thomas Penn, *Pharmacology*, Sidmouth, the author, 1822, p. 304.

²³ *More secret remedies*, London, British Medical Association, 1912, p. 205.

²⁴ E. Barlow, ‘A case in which chalybeate pills were retained for an unusual time in the intestine’, *Lancet*, 1827, 11: 806–807.

a purgative which, in two instances, was aloes. Unfortunately suggested formulae are not available for the four remaining female pills in the present sample.

Two types were of West Country origin. Trowbridge Pills first appeared in the sample in 1744 as Mrs. Jane Hanny's Pills of Trowbridge, but by 1755 her name was no longer mentioned.²⁵ These advertisements merely listed the product and did not say that it was for female use, but in the mid-nineteenth century, a chemist in Frome was advertising "The Golden Pills of Life and Beauty (or Trowbridge Pills Y and O)". The Y-type pills were for all female ailments and could be taken with great advantage from the age of twelve to fifty years, "and all who have the care of Young ladies at schools should keep a supply of these Pills".²⁶ The other local product was Mr. Sherratt's Female Pills and their advertisement in 1804 showed the scope of the proprietor's practice in Bristol.²⁷ Mr. Sherratt described himself as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a man-midwife who "continues to put Poor Women to Bed at half price"; he also sold his own preparations such as a cordial for child-bed women, an ointment, a bolus for rheumatic pains and a tooth powder; he cleaned and scaled teeth and had invented an instrument which extracted teeth with uncommon ease; and he supplied trusses for ruptures.

The two remaining types of pills originated in London. One pill for females was advertised by Dr. William Liston in a Bristol newspaper of 1852 as "one of the most safe and valuable discoveries ever made for the removal of obstruction". It is not clear, however, from the advertisement alone whether this was the same pill as was supplied for leucorrhoea and as a general medicine.²⁸ The others were the Restorative Salo Pills, advertised in the Bath newspapers in 1790 as "an effectual remedy to remove all obstructions and irregularities" by Mrs. Millar, a midwife living near St. Paul's Churchyard.²⁹ She also advertised facilities for lying-in. By the end of the century, the pills were being sold from the same address by Mr. White, surgeon and man-midwife, and Mrs. White, midwife.³⁰ At this time they were also being retailed at the newspaper printing office in Bath,³¹ but had the distinction of being far more expensive than any of the pills so far mentioned of which the smallest packs advertised ranged in price from 6*d.*, in the case of Trowbridge Pills in 1755, to 2*s.* 9*d.* for Widow Welch's Pills in 1856. Restorative Salo Pills cost 22*s.* the box. Early in the nineteenth century, Mr. and Mrs. White continued to advertise lying-in facilities but the advertisement did not mention their pills. They did, however, offer postal advice "in all disorders incident to women and children".³² The high price of their pills and the offer of direct contact by post recalls the practice of the venders of some female medicines at the end of the nineteenth century, to be discussed below.

Dr. Locock's Female Wafers remain to be considered in this group. They were

²⁵ *Bath Journal*, 22 October 1744, 29 January 1750; *The Bath and Bristol guide, or the tradesman's and traveller's pocket companion*, 3rd ed., Bath, T. Boddely, 1755, advertisement; *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 10 July 1802.

²⁶ *Bristol Mercury*, 7 January 1854, supplement p. 4.

²⁷ *Bristol Gazette*, 24 May 1804.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 December 1852.

²⁹ *Bath Chronicle*, 10 June 1790.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 January 1799.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1799.

³² *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 16 January 1802.

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marketed by Da Silva & Co., who also sold Dr. Locock's Pulmonary Wafers and Aperient Wafers: the advertisements stressed that they were not pills and that any pills by the same name were counterfeits.³³ Considerable annoyance must have been caused by the proprietors of nostrums who associated well-known medical names with their products, and the case of Dr. Locock's Wafers illustrates how difficult it was to prevent such a practice. Locock was a particularly good name to attach to a female medicine as Charles Locock was the eminent physician accoucheur to the Queen.³⁴ Editorial comment in the *Lancet* in 1846 called on him to repudiate his implied association with Dr. Locock's Pulmonary Wafers,³⁵ but he explained the difficulties in a letter which only went half-way towards satisfying the editor.³⁶ Apparently the printed handbills attributed the formula to Dr. H. Locock, which was the name of Charles Locock's deceased father on whose account he could not issue a disclaimer; and he pointed out that any such disclaimer to be effective would have to be printed with a frequency and geographical range approaching that of Da Silva's widespread advertisements.

Dr. Locock's Female Wafers were said to "remove all Obstructions, Heaviness, Fatigue on Slight Exertion, Palpitation of the Heart, Lowness of Spirits, Weakness" and to allay pain.³⁷ They were also said to have no taste of medicine and to contain no mineral. The latter claim agrees with the recipe given by Cooley which showed the ingredients as sugar, horehound, liquorice, senna and jalap.³⁸ Beasley, however, claimed that Locock's Wafers owed their activity to morphia,³⁹ but he did not specify the type of wafer and none of the formulae given to Cooley included opium.

2. Elixirs, drops and tinctures

The first liquid medicine met in the sample of newspapers was Dr. Fraunces' Female Strengthening Elixir, patented in 1751 by Joseph Fraunces, an apothecary of Daventry.⁴⁰ The specifications for its preparation start in an appropriately impressive manner with directions to calcine half a pound each of various precious or semi-precious stones, described as lapis smaragd, topaz hyacinth, sardin, and sapphir. They were then to be mixed with a gallon of spirit of wine to which was also added calcined antimony and iron in the form of crocus martis astringens. The mixture was to be set in a dunghill to mature for two months after which it was filtered and to it were added various balsams, isinglass and shavings of hartshorn and ivory, as well as white nettle flowers, roots of bistort and tormentil and the best rhubarb. The next directions were to distil and cohobate six times, then to add salt of vipers and camphire.

³³ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 5 January 1850; *Bristol Times*, 4 January 1851; *Bristol Gazette*, 1 January 1852; *Illustrated London News*, 26 January 1850.

³⁴ William Munk, *The roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, London, Royal College of Physicians, 1878, vol. 3, pp. 270–272; *Dictionary of national biography*.

³⁵ *Lancet*, 1846, i: 251–252.

³⁶ Letter of Charles Locock and editorial comment, *ibid.*, 1846, i: 311, 307–308.

³⁷ *Bristol Gazette*, 26 August 1852.

³⁸ W. North (ed.), *Cooley's cyclopaedia of practical receipts*, 7th ed., London, J. & A. Churchill, 1892, vol. 2, p. 1765.

³⁹ Henry Beasley, *The druggist's general receipt book*, 9th ed., London, J. & A. Churchill, 1886, p. 185.

⁴⁰ British patent, no. 661, 1751.

If iron in any form had gone into solution, the distillation would have removed it, unless the directions are meant to imply that the final distillate was re-mixed with the mother liquor and not distilled further. At all events it seems unlikely that much of this complicated and expensive procedure would have been followed to prepare the elixir widely advertised and distributed by Dicey & Co., and retailed at 1s. 6d. the bottle.⁴¹

The advertisements for Fraunces' Elixir in the eighteenth-century Bath newspapers usually gave little more information than is contained in the name of the medicine but the patent specifications implied that it was particularly intended for the treatment of leucorrhoea. They also suggested that it was useful for the male as "an excellent restorative and a most efficacious remedy in all seminal weaknesses and debility of the genital parts." The advertisements in the Bristol papers early in the nineteenth century dropped the word "female" from the title of the medicine which was then simply Fraunces' Strengthening Elixir.⁴²

Deobstruent Drops, which were sold at the end of the eighteenth century by J. Fuller of Covent Garden, were designed to "remove all Female Irregularities, restore the Spirits, and invigorate the Constitution".⁴³ Their composition can only be guessed but the advertisement was again concentrated on the younger female, claiming that "every check that is given, at the period of life in which Nature has ordained a certain salutary change, is a reduction of their Health and Happiness. The Bloom of Rustic Nature is withdrawn, and its seat assumed by pallid sickness, supported by Indolence and Luxury." The advertiser attached much blame to the female seminaries in and about the great metropolis which, he claimed, were "miserably conducted".

The last medicine in this group was prepared by Ebenezer Sibly, an astrologer with an M.D. from King's College, Aberdeen.⁴⁴ He tells us that his studies induced him "to attempt the chemical preparation of two subtle Tinctures, constituted of a co-mixture of the purest elements of which our blood is composed, and adapted to the peculiar temperatures and constitutions of the opposite sexes. . . . That adapted to the Woman, I call the Lunar Tincture, as being calculated to act upon the menstrual and vegetative fluids, and as being compounded of those elements which make up the frame and temperature of her body".⁴⁵ An effect of the moon on menstrual function would probably have been a familiar idea, and Richard Mead had written on the subject.⁴⁶ Dr. Sibly's Lunar Tincture was advertised in Bath at the end of the eighteenth century and was still appearing in Bristol newspapers in 1854.⁴⁷ It apparently disappeared by the end of the century, but *More secret remedies*, published

⁴¹ *Bath Advertiser*, 24 December 1757; *Bath Chronicle*, 25 June 1761, 4 January 1770, 31 December 1789.

⁴² *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 23 January 1802.

⁴³ *Bath Herald*, 8 September 1792.

⁴⁴ *Dictionary of national biography*.

⁴⁵ E. Sibly, *The medical mirror or treatise on the impregnation of the human female*, London, the author, 1798, pp. 63–64.

⁴⁶ Richard Mead, *De imperio solis ac lunae in corpora humana et morbis inde oriundis*, 2nd ed., London, J. Brindley, 1746, pp. 46–47, 87–90.

⁴⁷ *Bath Herald*, 3 November 1792, 19 January 1793; *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 17 July 1802; *Bristol Mirror*, 7 May 1808; *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 3 November 1810; *Bristol Mercury*, 25 February 1854.

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by the British Medical Association, shows that the idea of a lunar influence on female reproduction was still used for advertisements in the twentieth century. Blak Thyrol Female Pills were claimed to remove all obstructions and irregularities because blak thyrol was “a moon plant” and the female reproductive organs were “entirely under the influence of the moon”.⁴⁸

Sibly’s medical writings quote cases treated with the Lunar Tincture⁴⁹ and in an *Essay on the virtues and efficacy of Dr. Sibly’s Lunar Tincture* he described its use for green sickness, fluor albus and for indispositions attendant on pregnancy. He claimed that the tincture would prevent abortion from any cause and suggested that it should be taken regularly to promote conception.⁵⁰

TREATMENT OF CHLOROSIS AND AMENORRHOEA BY THE REGULAR PRACTITIONERS

The advertisements for many of the medicines described above stressed their usefulness in young women, sometimes speaking of the disorders of virgins or of the green sickness, and often advising their use in schools. The circumstances or types of menstrual abnormalities and irregularities in older women were rarely discussed. The younger female was, perhaps, a rewarding target for the advertisers, and green sickness was probably not uncommon, particularly among those likely to be reading the newspaper advertisements. Samuel Ashwell, writing in 1836, implied that “diseases of menstruation” were of very frequent occurrence, especially in the towns, and stated that chlorosis with amenorrhoea was their commonest form.⁵¹ Chlorosis was familiar enough for Christopher Anstey to choose it as the appropriate ailment to attribute to little Tabby Runt in *The new Bath guide* (1766). It would be instructive if the medicines used by the regular practitioners in these common types of amenorrhoea could be compared with the advertised proprietary medicines. The paucity of information about the composition of the latter has already been mentioned but it seems likely that at least three types of female pills consisted of iron salts with aloes or other purgative, while the female wafers were mainly purgative. It will be seen that these female medicines were very like some used by the regular practitioners.

Sydenham had prescribed a pill consisting mainly of iron filings to be used daily for thirty days in cases of hysteria, chlorosis, and secondary amenorrhoea.⁵² Boerhaave also mentioned the treatment of amenorrhoea with iron, listing various other procedures and ending with instructions to strengthen the vessels with chalybeats (i.e. iron) and astringents.⁵³ William Cullen advised exercise and purging for chlorosis, and at the same time tonic medicines of which, he says, “the chalybeates have been

⁴⁸ *More secret remedies*, op. cit., note 23 above, p. 206.

⁴⁹ Sibly, op. cit., note 45 above; E. Sibly, *A key to physic and the occult sciences*, London, the author, 1798.

⁵⁰ E. Sibly, *Essay on the virtues and efficacy of Dr. Sibly’s Lunar Tincture in all diseases peculiar to the female sex*, London, the author [n.d.], pp. 2–7.

⁵¹ Samuel Ashwell, ‘Observations on chlorosis and its complications’, *Guy’s Hosp. Rep.*, 1836, 1: 529–579.

⁵² Thomas Sydenham, *Processus integri*, in *The works of Thomas Sydenham*, translated by R. G. Latham, London, Sydenham Society, 1850, vol. 2, pp. 231–232, 288–289.

⁵³ H. Boerhaave, *Aphorisms concerning the knowledge and cure of diseases*, translated from the Latin ed. of 1728, London, W. Innys, 1742, aphorism 1297, p. 386.

chiefly recommended".⁵⁴ Although advising the same type of treatment for secondary amenorrhoea as for chlorosis, he was less certain that tonics, among which he presumably included iron, were useful and he was not impressed with the effectiveness of the drugs usually considered as emmenagogues.

Other writers in the eighteenth century advised similar lines of treatment. John Freind, in his *Emmenologia*, described cases of primary and secondary amenorrhoea treated with iron filings, and he advanced three reasons why treatment with steel tended to promote menstruation.⁵⁵ William Smellie was content mainly to quote Freind's cases and recommend his treatment.⁵⁶ Henry Manning, in his *Treatise on female diseases*,⁵⁷ recognized that amenorrhoea might be due on some occasions to "a deficiency of blood" and at other times be associated with a plethoric condition and an excess of blood. For the latter he recommended bleeding and aloetic purgatives, but for women of lax and cachectic constitution he prescribed "chalybeate medicines, which are justly esteemed the most sovereign remedies in all disorders arising from relaxation". For chlorosis he first used a gentle emetic and then aloetic purgatives before giving iron, of which he writes that "chalybeates deserve justly to be esteemed as the most indispensable remedies in the cure of the chlorosis, and to the operation of which all other medicines are to be considered in a manner as only preparative." Alexander Hamilton in his treatise on female complaints advised that amenorrhoea associated with general weakness should be treated with a nourishing diet, the moderate use of wine, gentle exercise, Peruvian bark, steel mineral waters and cold baths.⁵⁸

Writers on the diseases of women in the first half of the nineteenth century often shared very similar views about therapy. Marshall Hall in his article on chlorosis in the *Cyclopaedia of practical medicine* advised an aperient medicine followed by a pill of equal quantities of aloes and ferrous sulphate which was "in the writer's experience, almost specific".⁵⁹ Charles Locock, writing in the same volume,⁶⁰ recommended that the patient with chlorosis should be purged and then treated with iron, preferably in the form of *Mistura ferri composita*, a mixture also containing myrrh and spirit of nutmeg, which was similar to that known as Griffith's mixture. Secondary amenorrhoea was to be treated on similar lines and he had frequently found a combination of myrrh, aloes, sulphate of iron, and essential oil of savine to be most useful. James Blundell also recommended iron as the sulphate or carbonate or in a mixture to be used after emetics and purgatives in chlorosis,⁶¹ and Fleetwood Churchill

⁵⁴ William Cullen, *First lines of the practice of physic*, 3rd ed., Edinburgh, William Creech, 1781, vol. 2, pp. 16, 338–344.

⁵⁵ John Freind, *Emmenologia*, translated by Thomas Dale, London, T. Cox, 1729, pp. 130, 135, 196.

⁵⁶ William Smellie, *A treatise on the theory and practice of midwifery*, vol. 2, 1754, republished London, New Sydenham Society, 1877, pp. 21–25.

⁵⁷ Henry Manning, *A treatise on female diseases*, 2nd ed., London, R. Baldwin, 1775, pp. 64–77, 91–96.

⁵⁸ Alexander Hamilton, *A treatise on the management of female complaints and of children in early infancy*. Edinburgh, Peter Hill, 1792, p. 139.

⁵⁹ Marshall Hall, *Chlorosis*, in *Cyclopaedia of practical medicine*, ed. John Forbes, Alexander Tweedie & John Conolly, London, Sherwood, Gilbert & Piper, 1833, vol. 1, pp. 377–390.

⁶⁰ Charles Locock, *Amenorrhoea*, in *Cyclopaedia of practical medicine*, op. cit., note 59 above, pp. 67–71.

⁶¹ James Blundell, *Observations on some of the more important diseases of women*, ed. by Thomas Castle, London, E. Cox, 1837, pp. 236–241.

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prescribed “aloetic purgatives, in combination with some preparation of iron.”⁶² Samuel Ashwell preferred iron in the form of the sulphate for treating chlorosis and remarked that “occasionally, the effect of the iron is almost magical”.⁶³ He advocated bleeding, exercise and a spare diet for robust and plethoric patients with secondary amenorrhoea, but tonics and stimulants for amenorrhoea in delicate, irritable, and hysteric females. He considered iron a most valuable emmenagogue and realized that its effect was indirect by way of improvement in the quality of the blood.

If the suggested composition of Hooper’s, Welch’s and Fuller’s Benedictine Pills is correct, they were clearly similar to some of the medicines used by the regular practitioners and presumably they too could sometimes be “almost magical” in the treatment of chlorosis. Even the purely aperient Locock’s Female Wafer would have matched one form of established treatment: James Hamilton, celebrated for his use of purgatives, believed that purgation was the important part of the management of chlorosis, though even he admitted that tonic medicines might be helpful in a secondary role.⁶⁴ The regular practitioners also used a wide range of drugs which were classified as emmenagogues for the treatment of otherwise resistant amenorrhoea. John Murray, for example, writing on materia medica early in the nineteenth century,⁶⁵ listed castor, assafoetida, galbanum, mercury, rhubarb, black hellebore, mustard seed, madder, rue, and savin as emmenagogues in addition to iron and aloes. This was by no means an exhaustive list of drugs credited with an action on the uterus, but there was considerable scepticism about the virtues of many of them. Cullen’s views have already been quoted and Paris was insistent that there was no proof that any of the so-called emmenagogues had a direct action on the uterus and that unless this was recognized it would be wiser not to classify drugs under this heading.⁶⁶

These female pills, of which we probably know the composition and which seem so like some used in regular practice, are likely to have done much good and little harm. But there may well have been other proprietary medicines which contained the more violent “emmenagogues”, and one such figures in the cautionary case, presumably occurring in America, quoted by Dewees.⁶⁷ He was consulted by the mother of a fifteen-year-old girl with primary amenorrhoea and, as she was in good health and showed no pubertal changes, he explained to the mother that treatment to “bring down her courses” was neither necessary nor justifiable. The mother was apparently satisfied with this advice but subsequently “determined upon the trial of a medicine of much celebrity, vended by a quack in similar cases. She procured it, and gave it according to directions.” Dewees was called when the girl was dying, apparently from poisoning by oil of savine.

⁶² Fleetwood Churchill, *Outline of the principal diseases of females*, Dublin, Martin Keene, 1838, p. 120.

⁶³ Samuel Ashwell, *A practical treatise on the diseases peculiar to women*, London, Samuel Highley, 1844, pp. 26, 59–69, 78.

⁶⁴ James Hamilton, *Observations on the utility and administration of purgative medicines in several diseases*, 3rd ed., Edinburgh, James Simpson, 1809, pp. 99–101.

⁶⁵ John Murray, *A system of materia medica and pharmacology*, Edinburgh, John Anderson, 1813, vol. 1, p. 360.

⁶⁶ J. A. Paris, *Pharmacologia*, 5th ed., London, W. Phillips, 1822, vol. 1, p. 165.

⁶⁷ William P. Dewees, *A compendious system of midwifery*, London, John Miller, 1825, p. 133.

FEMALE MEDICINES AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

At the end of the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, the medical press was much concerned with the “female medicines” as potential abortifacients. The *Lancet* carried a series of articles under the uncompromising title of “Quacks and abortion”,⁶⁸ while the *British Medical Journal* dealt with female medicines in its attack on secret remedies in general.⁶⁹ One theme of these publications was that some of the medicines were advertised in such a way as to suggest to prospective purchasers that they were intended as abortifacients. This view was supported by the wording of some of the advertisements quoted, such as that for Mr. P. Blanchard’s medicine which “should not be taken by those expecting to become Mothers, as it is sure to produce a miscarriage”.⁷⁰ It is hard to believe in the context in which it is presented that this seemingly innocent disclaimer is anything but a clever illegal advertisement. The sale by some proprietors of a series of medicines of ascending strengths (at increasing prices), accompanied by letters of encouragement and appropriate instructions, also suggests that the object of the medicines was to terminate pregnancy rather than cure amenorrhoea from other causes. Even an observer who can read the advertisements for female medicines in eighteenth-century newspapers without suspecting any devious intentions, will probably be convinced by the material chosen to illustrate their theme by the writers in these medical journals more than a hundred years later. It was apparently possible in the case of *Owen vs. Greenberg* in 1898 to convince a jury that an advertisement for a female medicine suggested that it could be used to procure abortion.⁷¹ In the same year, there was also a convincing demonstration that large numbers of women who bought certain female medicines did so intending to use them as abortifacients. The Chrimes brothers were convicted of extorting money by threats of criminal proceedings from women to whom they themselves had sold the medicines. The demands were made in letters signed “Chas. J. Mitchell, Public Official”, but the police intercepted the replies: over a four-day period more than 400 letters were received from women who tacitly admitted their guilty intentions by enclosing the money demanded.⁷²

Many of the female medicines which attracted suspicion differed from those advertised in the earlier newspaper samples in that they were not sold by retail agents but came directly by post from the proprietors. But a feature linking many of the later medicines with those discussed earlier was their composition which was frequently based on iron and aloes. Analyses of twenty-three types of female pills or tablets were given either in *More secret remedies*⁷³ or in the articles in the *Lancet* referred to previously.⁷⁴ All but two of the twenty-three appear to have contained iron, usually as ferrous sulphate or carbonate in doses equivalent to anything between 2.5 and 30 mg of metal in each pill, and twelve of them also contained aloes. Some contained other purgatives and five were said to contain pennyroyal. Savin and apiol were each

⁶⁸ ‘Quacks and abortion’, *Lancet*, 1898, ii: 1570–1571, 1651–1653, 1723–1725, 1807–1809.

⁶⁹ ‘The composition of certain secret remedies’, op. cit., note 10 above.

⁷⁰ ‘Quacks and abortion’, op. cit., note 68 above, pp. 1723–1725.

⁷¹ *The Times*, 10 March 1898, p. 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17, 19, 20 and 21 December 1898.

⁷³ *More secret remedies*, op. cit., note 23 above.

⁷⁴ ‘Quacks and abortion’, op. cit., note 68 above.

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thought to be present in two products and rue and tansy in one each.

Twelve liquid female medicines were described in these two publications (as well as one which was to be taken in late pregnancy to ensure an easy confinement and is not considered here). Two in which the analyst could recognize no pharmacologically active ingredient other than ethanol, included Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, which was presumably the inspiration for the bawdy song entitled *Lydia Pink*⁷⁵ which was bowdlerized and otherwise altered to reach the peak of popularity as *Lily the Pink*.⁷⁶ Four other liquid medicines contained iron and four were described as similar to the official compound decoction of aloes.

THE BELIEF THAT PREPARATIONS OF IRON CAUSED ABORTION

It seems clear that in the latter half of the nineteenth century preparations of iron were taken with a view to inducing abortion. The practice sometimes resulted in criminal proceedings as in the case of *Reg. vs Rundle*⁷⁷ in 1863 when ferric chloride had been given daily, or of *Reg. vs Wallis*⁷⁸ in 1871 when Griffith's mixture and pennyroyal had been used. Ferric chloride appears to have been popular and one instance of its use was recorded in 1860 when a group of pregnant women in Dudley were said to have combined in taking it to procure abortion in a form known as "steel drops".⁷⁹ Charles Phillips in 1882 wrote that ferric chloride had been "in frequent popular use as an abortifacient" and he mentioned ferrous sulphate in the same context.⁸⁰ Stevenson, editing Taylor on medical jurisprudence, noted that a mixture of an aqueous extract of aloes and large doses of ferric chloride was a favourite among abortion-mongers.⁸¹

Medical writers on pregnancy in the first half of the nineteenth century sometimes recommended treatment with iron for various intercurrent conditions. John Burns, for instance, warned that emetics, strong purgatives, diuretics, and full courses of mercury might cause abortion and should be avoided during pregnancy; but he advised the use of iron for recurrent "spasm of the stomach" and palpitations of the heart without mentioning any possible danger.⁸² Fleetwood Churchill also recommended iron, "especially the muriated tincture", for palpitations in pregnancy without adding any warning.⁸³ Later in the century, the possible danger of iron was often mentioned, though, as late as 1871, John Tanner recommended aperients followed by quinine or iron for toothache during pregnancy without discussing the possibility of

⁷⁵ *More rugby songs*, London, Sphere Books, 1968, p. 105.

⁷⁶ Recording of 'Lily the Pink' by The Scaffold, Parlophone R5734, 1968.

⁷⁷ Alfred S. Taylor, *The principles and practice of medical jurisprudence*, 3rd ed., ed. by Thomas Stevenson, London, J. & A. Churchill, 1883, vol. 2, p. 183.

⁷⁸ *The Times*, 17 July 1871, p. 6.

⁷⁹ *Medical Times*, 1860, 2: 84–85.

⁸⁰ Charles D. F. Phillips, *Materia medica and therapeutics. Inorganic substances*, London, J. & A. Churchill, 1882, p. 607.

⁸¹ Taylor, op. cit., note 77 above, p. 184.

⁸² John Burns, *The principles of midwifery*, 4th ed., London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1817, pp. 214, 167, 173; 10th ed., London, Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1843, pp. 320–321, 267, 273.

⁸³ Fleetwood Churchill, *Observations on the diseases incident to pregnancy and childbed*, Dublin, Martin Keene & Son, 1840, pp. 128–129.

iron causing abortion, though he warned that dental extraction might do so.⁸⁴ Thomas Hawkes Tanner, however, thought that the various preparations of steel “as a rule, are best avoided”, though he still suggested the “careful use” of iron in palpitations and recurrent fainting.⁸⁵ Similarly Tyler Smith recommended iron when pregnancy was accompanied by marked anaemia though “in ordinary cases, the last thing we should do would be to give any preparation of iron, from the fear of inducing abortion”.⁸⁶ The same view was expressed by William Leishman who thought that it was “very doubtful whether iron can with propriety be administered in most cases of pregnancy” but who advised its use if true chlorosis was also present.⁸⁷

Medical evidence was given in court about the dangers of iron treatment during pregnancy. In the case of *Reg. vs. Wallis*, Griffith’s mixture was said by some medical witnesses to be likely to cause abortion,⁸⁸ and Bathurst Woodman was surprised to hear a medical witness swear at an inquest that the prescription of iron was calculated to induce abortion.⁸⁹ Dixon Mann, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, said that there were many medical men who would not prescribe iron for a pregnant woman and that he had heard it stated in evidence that the tincture of the perchloride of iron, in doses of five drops, was a dangerous and highly improper medicine to give to a woman with child.⁹⁰ Doubts on this score may have lingered in the mind of the writer of the editorial comment in the *British Medical Journal* of 1907 that “there can be no doubt that the unchecked administration to pregnant women of aloes, iron sulphate, and oil of pennyroyal . . . cannot fail to produce harmful and possibly even fatal results.”⁹¹

In the 1870s there were several occasions when well-informed obstetricians tried to counteract what we would now consider to be this unfounded fear that iron was abortifacient. In the case of *Reg. vs. Wallis*, referred to above, it was reported that Dr. Barnes of St. Thomas’s Hospital and Dr. Tyler Smith of St. Mary’s Hospital gave evidence of the innocuous nature of Griffith’s mixture.⁹² The matter was discussed on two recorded occasions at the Obstetrical Society of London. In 1870, Bathurst Woodman described how he had been using preparations of iron during pregnancy for nine years without any ill effects: Graily Hewitt, then president of the society, said that this was also his practice and, he believed, that of most of the gentlemen present.⁹³ In the same year a letter appeared in the *British Medical Journal* from W. Henry Day of Wakefield who thought the notion that preparations of iron tended to cause abortion was “as absurd as the old antiphlogistic ideas of inflammation”: he found that iron therapy helped to prevent abortion in weak debilitated women.⁹⁴ Similar comments were made at the Obstetrical Society of London four

⁸⁴ John Tanner, *Practical midwifery and obstetrics*, London, J. & A. Churchill, 1871, p. 33.

⁸⁵ Thomas Hawkes Tanner, *On the signs and diseases of pregnancy*, 2nd ed., London, Henry Renshaw, 1867, pp. 344, 377, 379.

⁸⁶ Tyler Smith, *A manual of obstetrics*, London, John Churchill, 1858, p. 135.

⁸⁷ William Leishman, *A system of midwifery*, Glasgow, James Maclehoose, 1880, pp. 249–250.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *op. cit.*, note 77 above, pp. 185–186.

⁸⁹ *Br. med. J.*, 1870, i: 141.

⁹⁰ J. Dixon Mann, *Forensic medicine and toxicology*, London, C. Griffin, 1902, p. 128.

⁹¹ ‘Emmenagogues in the newspapers’, *Br. med. J.*, 1907, ii: 1672–1673.

⁹² *The Times*, 17 July 1871, p. 6.

⁹³ *Trans. Obstet. Soc. Lond.*, 1871, 12: 33–34.

⁹⁴ W. Henry Day, letter, *Br. med. J.*, 1870, i: 198.

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years later when John Bassett, of Birmingham, described how the administration of iron during pregnancy was of great value to debilitated patients and, in his experience, reduced the incidence of post-partum haemorrhage in women of this type.⁹⁵ Robert Barnes at this meeting asked if any of the Fellows had reason to suppose that abortion had been caused by the administration of iron: no replies to this query are recorded, so presumably the experience of those present agreed with that of Dr. Barnes who had frequently given iron with no ill effects. These views then began to be reflected in the medical texts: Alexander Milne wrote that he had never seen any harm accrue from the use of “the lighter preparations of iron”;⁹⁶ William Playfair referred to the abortifacient reputation of iron as “unfounded prejudice”;⁹⁷ and Charles Phillips was able to write that he found “a general impression gaining ground that iron may be taken during pregnancy without injurious effects.”⁹⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The medicines advertised in the samples of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers which were examined must represent only a fraction of those available to the public. Other sources and routes of supply may have been particularly important in the distribution of female pills, and ones offered for disreputable purposes may have been advertised more discreetly than in the newspapers. What little evidence is available suggests that the composition of the advertised medicines was based on that of the medicines used by the regular practitioner. There is little to suggest that the medicines advertised in the newspapers sampled were intended to be used to induce abortion, and much to suggest that they would have been effective in treating chlorosis. As already mentioned, Sibly's Lunar Tincture was advertised for the prevention of abortion and as an aid to conception. The same was true of the Aromatic Lozenges of Steel which were advertised from the late eighteenth century under headings such as “Hymeneal Happiness”, “Matrimony”, and “Wedlock”.⁹⁹ Though not included among the female medicines, because they were also for use by the male, these lozenges were offered for the cure of female infertility and in one advertisement there appeared a thirty-six-line poem, reputedly by a previously barren female who had managed to conceive, thanks to Dr. Senate's Lozenges of Steel.¹⁰⁰

The attribution of abortifacient properties to iron was presumably a direct extrapolation from its reputation in the treatment of both primary and secondary amenorrhoea. Iron appeared to promote menstruation when given to chlorotic patients though, as already pointed out, writers on chlorosis usually appreciated that the effect on the uterus was indirect. A parallel argument for the avoidance of iron therapy during pregnancy was probably based on the fact that iron was commonly considered

⁹⁵ John Bassett, ‘On the propriety of administering iron during pregnancy as a preventative of post-partum haemorrhage,’ *Trans. Obstet. Soc. Lond.*, 1875, 16: 111–115.

⁹⁶ Alexander Milne, *The principles and practice of midwifery*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, E. & S. Livingstone, 1879, p. 469.

⁹⁷ William S. Playfair, *A treatise on the science and practice of midwifery*, 3rd ed., London, Smith, Elder, 1880, vol. 1, p. 223.

⁹⁸ Phillips, *op. cit.*, note 80 above, p. 607.

⁹⁹ *Bath Chronicle*, 7 March, 26 September, 5 December, 1799; *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 27 November 1802.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1802.

to be contra-indicated when "plethora" was present.¹⁰¹ That many of the symptoms of pregnancy were due to such a plethora was also a common view:¹⁰² hence the contra-indication.

There must always have been keen interest in the search for a drug which would reliably produce abortion and this resulted in the hopeful but rarely successful use of a wide variety of substances during the nineteenth century.¹⁰³ The legalization of abortion during the present generation has been associated with a striking change in attitudes, and Potts has recently commented that if an effective and safe medical method of terminating pregnancy could be found, it would have "an exceptionally wide application".¹⁰⁴ The use of prostaglandins has shown that the induction of abortion by the administration of a drug or physiological substance is a feasible proposition,¹⁰⁵ and it seems likely that pharmaceutical ingenuity will eventually produce an abortifacient which is effective when taken by mouth. But, if such a substance is ever used routinely in the control of human fertility, it will be as a female pill which is totally different in conception and purpose to those advertised in the newspapers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

SUMMARY

The advertisements for "female medicines" have been studied in a sample of Bath and Bristol newspapers between 1744 and 1859. The medicines were offered mainly for menstrual "obstructions and irregularities", particularly in young women, and sometimes specifically for green sickness. The three types of female pills for which probable formulae are available appear to have contained iron salts and purgatives. They were similar to preparations used by regular practitioners for treating primary and secondary amenorrhoea and would probably have been useful in chlorosis. Later in the nineteenth century it seems likely that purchasers of some female pills were encouraged by the advertisements to believe that the pills would induce abortion. Many contained iron and this substance had acquired the reputation of being abortifacient, probably because of its ability to induce menstruation in chlorosis. Towards the end of the century this view about the danger of iron appears to have been losing ground but was probably still held by some practitioners.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Pereira, *The elements of materia medica and therapeutics*, 4th ed., London, Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1854, vol. 1, p. 196. Phillips, *op. cit.*, note 80 above, p. 567.

¹⁰² Churchill, *op. cit.*, note 83 above, pp. 8-10 summarizes the views of various authors.

¹⁰³ Taylor, *op. cit.*, note 77 above, pp. 182-184.

¹⁰⁴ D. M. Potts, 'Termination of pregnancy' in 'Control of human fertility', ed. G. I. M. Swyer, *Br. med. Bull.* 1970, 26: 65-71.

¹⁰⁵ N. Wiqvist, M. Bygdeman and K. T. Kirton, *Non-steroidal antifertility agents in the female*, in *Control of human fertility*, ed. E. Diczfalusy and U. Borell, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1971, pp. 137-156.