

# **A BRIEF HISTORY OF PHARMACY AS A PROFESSION**

By  
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Pat Hogan opened Hogans Pharmacy in September 1940. More usually called chemists, Power & Mangans, Listons, Lairds, Boyds, Fitzgeralds, McMahon Days, & Stewarts – O’Connell St. and William St. were just some of the names of the chemists’ shops in the City at the time. All of these are gone now, and while Stewarts in Upper William Street – later Sean O’Neill’s - may still be run by a Pharmacist (Jim McCormack), Hogans’ is the only Pharmacy still in the same family 68 years later.

Pharmacists were first regulated and controlled by law in the nineteenth century, with the passing of the Pharmacy Act of 1875. This Act set up the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland and laid down strict standards for the practice of the profession and defined a pharmaceutical chemist as “keeping open shop for the compounding and dispensing of medicines.” It is curious that the Act survived, with minor amendment until 2007, when it was replaced by a newly restructured Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland. This new legislation was a landmark in that the Council – or governing body – is now composed of a majority of non-pharmacists. The purpose of the Society, then and now is to act in the public interest, ensuring the highest standards of practice. Only one Limerick pharmacist has served as President of the Society. This was the late Maurice Power, of Power and Mangan’s in O’Connell Street, who was President from 1957 to 1958.

Pharmacy has changed a lot since 1940. At that time, most medicines were made on the premises by each pharmacist, and wholesalers were used to source the raw materials used for the manufacture of creams, ointments, lotions, pastes, syrups, and in some cases tablet and suppositories. The shortage of ingredients was one of the major problems, which they faced. Anything that had to be sourced from England became problematic due to transport problems associated with World War 2. Most wholesalers were based in Dublin, such as Ayrton Saunders, Lennox’s, Wilcox Josceau and Boileau and Boyd, but Limerick was lucky to have May Roberts in Bank Place. Subsequently United Drug opened in Henry Street in 1953 and later still Allied Pharmaceutical Distributors opened in Garryglass in 1972.

Despite the fact that in the 1920s and 1930s patent medicines started to gain in popularity the list of these products was limited – Bayer Aspirin, Cullens Powders, Zam Buk and Beechams Pills were expensive though the latter claimed to be worth a

guinea a box! Many people still had faith in Senna Syrup or pods and the bottle that the chemist would make up himself! Every pharmacy had special formulas that were recorded in the pharmacist's own formulary for use in his pharmacy only. The Stomach Mixture, The Iron Tonic, The Cough Syrup, - each pharmacy had their own unique formula which was jealously guarded. The most famous of these would be Protumnal, a stomach mixture made in Hanley's Pharmacy in Shannon Street. I bought a bottle of this from John – father of Michael Hanley to take to Dublin for a customer of the pharmacy in which I was working at the time. He had used it and could find nothing as effective in Dublin. All pharmacies had “cures”, dispensed early on a Saturday or Monday morning, where a single dose often helped people to cope with the excesses of the previous weekend.

Prescriptions were regularly written for Mist. Pot. Cit. (Potassium Citrate Mixture) with a dose of a dram daily well diluted in water, for the treatment of cystitis. The pharmacist knew what the formula was. Nowadays a ready-made sachet is available, and the dose is 1 sachet mixed in water three times daily for 2 days. In fact originally most medicines were prepared from basic chemicals in each shop, for each prescription. Making tablets/pills was a detailed and difficult procedure. Certain substances were mixed in a mortar and pestle, liquid/water was added to make a stiff mass, rolled out on a marble slab, cut into strips on a special board and dusted with French chalk to prevent them sticking/cracking, The final product was then rolled in a special polishing device.

In the 1920s and 1930s pharmacists training in the College of Pharmacy in Mount Street in Dublin learned how to make a vast array of medicines from basic principles. The basic principles were the same – regardless of the ingredients – lotions, pastes, pills, suppositories, tablets, mixtures, ointments & creams, you either did it right and got it right, or threw it out and started again. For example Theobroma Oil was the basis of most suppositories. It had to be melted, but if you overheated the mixture it would never solidify. A paste had the ability to crack if stirred incorrectly and emulsions – the basis of most creams and lotions were particularly sensitive if the balance of oil and water was incorrect.

All these products were made by hand; there were no liquidisers or mixing machines. We still make ointments in the pharmacy today, but the ingredients now are a lot more sophisticated than the 1920s and 30s. But I still remember working with Lassar's Paste on a cold, frosty winter's morning, in a shop with no central heating!

Many of the raw materials and preparations used at that time had evocative names such as Laudanum, Chlorodyne, Bismuth Subgallate, Ginger pulv, Pulv Tragacanth Co, Theobroma Oil, Gentian Violet, Balsam of Peru, Balsam of Tolu, the names – and Latin abbreviations added to the mystique and created an aura around the medicine.

Pharmacies – then and now – sold more than medicines. Given their expertise and training in the manufacture of emulsions, creams and lotions, pharmacists were the obvious source of treatments of dry and chapped skin. Many pharmacists had their own formulas for moisturisers and cold creams.

Before the growth of modern cosmetics, especially during the war years, these products, gently fragranced by the addition of Rose Oil, Lavender, Gardenia, Lemon or Orange Oil..... were important at a time of rationing and scarce supplies.

Coty of Paris and Gala of London may have been making perfumes and cosmetics, but shipment by sea became increasingly difficult, while your local pharmacy always had Essential Oils of Lavender, Rose, Jasmine, Gardenia and many more for adding a touch of glamour to the local made cream. (As an aside, older women will remember that during the war, the red cover of the Sacred Heart Messenger Magazine – published by the Jesuits – was a useful source of rouge or blusher!)

Soap was another commodity that was difficult to get during the war. Pat Hogan had his own formula which proved very successful as a simple, but effective household staple.

Distilled Water was an important ingredient in most formulae. Most pharmacies had a still, which would operate continuously in order to provide a regular supply. These stills also provided a ready source of hot water for general cleaning purposes. The stills were specially designed so as to prevent them from distilling alcohol and Officers from Customs and Excise called on a regular basis to ensure that they hadn't been modified!

Popular photography developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of companies such as Kodak, who in 1891 introduced the first commercial roll film. The early days of photography demanded an expertise with use of chemicals and pharmacy was a natural fit. The pharmacist, because of his training, was able to appreciate and explain the importance of accurately measuring the developers and fixers to make sure that the film was correctly exposed and developed in the dark environment. Michael Whelan who ran a chemist's shop in O'Connell Street set up a film processing laboratory and provided a service for his colleagues throughout Limerick. The business still continues as Whelan's Cameras – run by his son Bernard.

Pharmacies in certain parts of the city had a healthy business in Veterinary medicines. Vigor Dog Tonic was manufactured by Hogan's and was very popular with greyhound trainers. Worm doses, drenches, doses to cleanse a cow after calving - all were made on the premises.

Limerick has always been a city with a large rural hinterland. Before the advent of co-operatives most farmers had to come to town to buy provisions and to sell animals. There were two major marts in Limerick – deCourcy's in Mulgrave St and Fitt's on the South Circular (or Back) Road. Mattersons at the Tait Clock, O'Mara's in Roches St and Shaws subsequently Clover Meats in Mulgrave St were bacon factories and O'Neills, Roches and Russells in Upper William St all sold flour and meal. Tinsley's in Upper William St sold salt and McCarthy's in Mulgrave St, Parnell St and South Circular Road dealt in skin and hides. J and G Boyd's of William Street

sold seeds, vegetable and fruit plants, as well as having a chemist's shop in the store. The Holliday and Darcy families still run Garden World in Ellen Street. All of these businesses provided a focus for the farmers coming into Limerick. These farmers ran accounts on a cyclical basis and let them run from one fair day to the next. Sell the produce and pay the bill!

This world changed dramatically with the advent of Sulphonamides – the forerunners of antibiotics. Aureomycin – an antibiotic imported by Whelehan's Chemists of Mullingar became an important addition to animal husbandry, improving the health and productivity of farm animals. Uniphar now owns the resulting business while the Whelehans are successful wine importers. Some readers will remember T.P. Whelehan's wine column in the Irish Times, while his sister Helen was a lecturer in Mary Immaculate Training College. Later, Penicillin – at a dose of 250,000 units four times a day – was to change forever the treatment and outcomes of hitherto dangerous infectious diseases.

An important responsibility for pharmacists – then and now – was the sale of poisons. Agatha Christie's expertise in the use of poisons was due to the fact that she trained as a dispenser in an English pharmacy. Arsenic, Strychnine and Belladonna were all available. In low doses these had medicinal properties – in fact Strychnine was an important ingredient as an appetite stimulant in some proprietary tonics up to the 1970s. Stronger concentrations were used to kill vermin. Poisons were sold in special ribbed glass bottles, brown or green, so that people would be able to distinguish them by touch.

Chemists played their part in the social scene in Limerick, with the Annual Chemists' Dance being held in Cruise's Royal Hotel – managed by Jackie Donnelly - each year. The dance always sold out and was a highlight of the social calendar. It was run in aid of the Pharmaceutical Society's Benevolent Fund, which – to this day – provides financial aid and advice to pharmacists, their families or former employees who may be in financial difficulties. In November 1966, 220 dinners cost £225.10.0 The drinks bill was £72.6.9, while a bar extension cost 4 guineas! Music was provided by well-known local bands such as Bud Clancy or later Tommy Drennan & the Monarchs. Old Spice which had been successfully launched in America in 1938 was brought to Ireland by T.P. Whelehan in the 1950s and many pharmacists remember being greeted with the distinctive perfume when they arrived at the door of the ballroom for the dance.

Up until the 1970s, the City Dispensary in Lower Gerald Griffin Street provided a medical service to a large percentage of the population in the city. It was run by the Local Health Authority, which was based at 104 Henry Street. They shared this building with Bord na gCon, who are still there. They had the ground floor, half the top floor and the annex at the side, as well as offices in Newcastle West. Limerick Corporation and Limerick County Council financed the Health Authority. Under the Health Act 1970, eight regional Health Boards were set up. Limerick, Clare and North Tipperary were all brought together to form the new Midwestern Health Board – a major rationalisation and centralisation of management at the time. Under the

same Act, the Medical Card Scheme was introduced. This replaced the dispensary, which had been run by Geoff Keogh and Tommy Corbett, and gave patients the opportunity to avail of the services of the doctor and pharmacist of their choice. .

The introduction of the Medical Card Scheme radically changed the face of pharmacy in Limerick and indeed nationally. The number of patients being seen increased dramatically and dealing with the Health Board became a major part of the day to day management of the pharmacy. It was around this time that the old Irish Drug Association became the Irish Pharmacy Union. As with all Unions their role was to negotiate on behalf of individual contractor pharmacists. There have been two Limerick Presidents of the IPU, Tim O'Malley (1978 – 1980) and Marie Hogan (2000 – 2002)

Through all the changes in Limerick and other urban centres over the years – with different buildings, transport and the ever changing environment, pharmacies – or chemist's shops are still there, on the high street serving the health needs of the people. But pharmacies now are very different to the chemist's shop of yesteryear. Laudanum, Chlorodyne, Pulv Tragacanth Co and Bismuth Subgallate are gone, but they are more than adequately replaced by the complex biotechnological, oncological and haematological products of the modern era.

Throughout it all one hopes that the 646,000 people who visit Irish pharmacies on a weekly basis – seeking advice on a wide variety of health concerns - continue to receive a friendly welcome, a listening ear and sound practical advice.

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