Unsafe medicine

Laudanum in the 19th century

Ruth Levitt

A careless mishap killed Sarah Newbery on 28 May 1843. She was a widow in her late 80s living in the parish of Hampton Wick near Hampton Court with her son, John Robert Kensett, who had returned from America to be with her in her old age. Due to recent stomach trouble, that morning she had taken a fluid ounce – over 550 drops.

The day before, John Kensett had been unable to find an old medicine bottle in a cupboard of home cures and so he picked up another empty one without checking its label, taking it to Mr Jones’s chemist shop a few minutes' walk away in Kingston upon Thames. He handed the bottle to the chemist's assistant, William Fothergill, and asked for two ounces of tincture of rhubarb. Fothergill asked if he was to put it in that bottle and John replied, “Yes, never mind the label.” Fothergill dispensed two ounces of a liquid into it, wrapped it and gave it back to John, who paid one shilling and waited for his change. Fothergill did not offer him any.

At home his mother asked him if there was any tincture of rhubarb in the house. He said he had just bought some, but advised her not to take it until morning in case its purgative action disturbed her during the night. He gave the bottle to their servant, Mary Lassam, without examining the contents or the label, and told her to give one-half to his mother at seven the next morning, which Mary did. Sarah told her that it tasted very nauseous. John came downstairs an hour later, feeling under the weather, and decided to have the other half of the medicine himself. He too found it very nauseous. He began his breakfast but soon felt too ill and lay down on the sofa in the parlour.

A little later, Mary saw Sarah and John deeply asleep. After another hour she looked in on Sarah and was “struck by [her] wild and singular appearance”. Mary had great difficulty waking John, who was extremely groggy and feeling dreadful. She helped him up the stairs to Sarah’s room, where he could see his mother was in a very bad way. He then checked the bottle’s label, which said “Laudanum – Poison”. They immediately called the doctor, who pumped Sarah’s stomach while John swallowed emetics and large amounts of warm water. John recovered, but his mother died that afternoon. The inquest took place four days later at the local King’s Arms Inn, conducted by William Baker, the Middlesex coroner, with a jury. The Times reported the evidence and the verdict: accidental death from laudanum administered by mistake.

Exactly the same conclusion had been reached by an inquest jury two years earlier, following the fatal administration of laudanum in place of tincture of rhubarb. Elie Galloway, 32, was married to a provision dealer in Newcastle. She had been unwell with digestive problems and by 31 January 1841 she felt much worse. Her husband sent two of their children to the druggist Mr Tinn for three-pennyworth of tincture of rhubarb, with a cup for the medicine and a piece of paper on which he had written “six drachms of the tincture of rhubarb” (one fluid ounce was eight drachms).

The children returned with the medicine, Mrs Galloway drank it down and remarked that it tasted like laudanum. Her condition deteriorated rapidly and the doctor was sent for. He confirmed that drops left in the cup were laudanum, and Elie died that evening despite having her stomach pumped. At the inquest the druggist admitted the piece of paper said “tincture of rhubarb” but denied he had dispensed laudanum, because he was “always so particular in selling [laudanum]...and enquired what the drug was for and labelled the vessel”. The Gateshead Observer concluded in its report that “druggists should keep poisons apart from other drugs. A fatal mistake...can hardly be regarded as a ‘pure accident,’ unless proper precautions have been taken to guard against error. In the
of his series ‘Marriage à la mode’, induced suicide in the final scene Hogarth had depicted a laudanum—of choice for suicide. In 1743, William for one fluid ounce (a very small fee from druggists for about sixpence glass bottles and was easily available cinnamon. It was sold in stoppered in wine with added saffron and is powdered opium dissolved and a powerful poison. Laudanum morphine and codeine; it is addictive for more than 2000 years. It contains sap, and has been known and used opium and laudanum, and deaths from accidental and intended poisoning continued throughout the 19th century.

The 1868 Pharmacy Act included a two-part schedule of poisons, reflecting the chemists’ success in protecting part of their market share. All listed substances had to be labelled with the contents of the container, the word ‘poison’, and the name and address of the seller. Chemists now had to keep a record of sales of substances in Part I, including preparations of arsenic, cyanides, mercury and strychnine, stating the date, substance, quantity and intended purpose, purchaser’s details and signature; and purchasers had to be known or recommended to them. “Opium and all preparations of Opium or of Poppies” were relegated to the end of the lighter-touch Part II list (only needing a label), together with chloroform, belladonna, oxalic acid and oil of almonds. Chemists flouting these rules risked a modest fine of up to five pounds (about half a week’s wage for the average day labourer at the time – expensive but not prohibitive) for a first offence. The Act entirely excluded patent medicines sold by a registered apothecary or chemist, as well as all exports and wholesale supplies. British legislators had already lagged behind several other countries and did not revise this law until the very end of the century.

These historical cases alert us to how long it took to regulate over-the-counter medicines and why, by the end of the 19th century, it was necessary to do so. In an internet era when self-dosing is once more rife, the challenge facing all consumers is: how much can you trust the e-quack? Unsafe medicines remain as much a danger to modern consumers as they were to Victorian ones.