

## TEACHERS EXHIBITION NOTES

# PILLS AND POTIONS

This exhibition is about how chemist shops changed between 1880 and 1940. You can see ...

- an 1880s dispensary where chemists made medicines
- antiques from the chemist shops of yesteryear
- a display about advertising in the 1930s.

You can also find out about old-fashioned remedies on a computer interactive and hear about the evils of constipation!

### **The 1880s dispensary**

Chemists worked in the dispensary, using tools like the ones in this display to make medicines. They made pills, powders and mixtures from pharmaceutical manuals as well as their own remedies. Customers could not see inside this area. But the visitor can see the tools that would have been used including:

- ceramic mortar and pestles
- a bark cutter used to cut up plant roots, bark and leaves for medicines
- pill-making machine and pill rounder
- copper still used to purify ingredients
- powder folders used before tablets were introduced
- ceramic storage jar for honey, the base of many medicines
- equal arm scales
- Abbot filter used to remove impurities and 'wrigglers' from water before mixing it into medicines
- drying oven and tincture press
- cork compressors used to squeeze cork stoppers into a range of bottles
- moulds to make suppositories which were used to relieve constipation.

### **Chemist shops of the 1930s**

By the 1930s many changes had taken place. Medicinal preparations were mass produced by pharmaceutical companies. The chemist trade became highly competitive and advertising was employed to encourage people to buy. There were advertisements on billboards, in newspapers, on radio, in shop windows, on shop counters and on the very packaging itself.

By this time chemist shops were also competing with large department stores for their trade. There is a display of photographs that show how one chemist chain, Washington H Soul Pattinson, responded by modernising its shops to attract customers. They gave their shopfronts a facelift in the new art deco style and created elaborate window and counter displays to advertise their products.

This section looks at advertisements for a range of goods found in chemist shops of the time as well as the packaging of the objects and display techniques.

It includes:

- products for infants
- Kodak cameras
- toiletries for men and women
- soaps
- general tonics.

Chemists aimed to sell not just the products but the ideas behind them. Advertisements persuaded people to believe in the importance of glamour, achievement, hygiene, motherhood and leisure. The products promised to provide all of these things.

The display invites you to focus on the advertising techniques for these products, the market identified for each product and

the social values they used to persuade the visitor to buy.

### **Products for infants**

In the early 1900s organisations such as the Infant Life Movement popularised concerns over the low birth rate and the level of infant mortality.

Because of these concerns and the interest in children as ‘the future of our nation’, infants (through their parents) became the target of a whole range of pharmaceutical goods.

Advertisers promoted chemists as advisers on baby health and they held competitions to encourage mothers to buy food supplements and the new ‘hygienic’ products that promised to make their babies jolly and beautiful.

### **The Kodak campaign**

By the 1930s photography was a popular pastime. Advertisements convinced people that a camera was essential for holidays and family events. The Kodak slogan ‘you push the button, we do the rest’ claimed it was so easy even women could do it!

Chemist shops became identified as the place for all your camera needs and were even recognised by the Kodak slogan and the orange and black stripes on their awnings.

### **Toiletries for men and women**

Most toiletries were marketed for women and they presented an ideal woman of the 1930s ... soft skinned, clear, youthful complexion, no underarm or leg hair, no odours, stylish, graceful, energetic and to top it all, a successful housewife.

Images of glamorous film stars predominated and cosmetic advertisements promised women glamour, youth, beauty ... even adventure! Chemists employed ‘beauty specialists’ from cosmetic companies to entice women into their shops and to advise them on their beauty needs.

Male toiletries promoted a virile, successful, businesslike image. Many of these advertisements used the work ethic ... hard work led to

success ... and someone who was healthy and strong was more likely to work hard and achieve more than someone who was skinny and puny.

While many men continued to use cutthroat razors, advertising concentrated on the efficiency of the new safety razor.

Toothpastes and brushes were marketed as essential for social success — clean teeth and fresh breath were promoted as gateways to life’s fun.

### **Soap**

By the 1930s the all-purpose soap of the 1800s was a thing of the past. Chemists sold soap for every occasion ... hand soaps, face soaps, shampoo, toothpaste, shaving cream.

The ‘bathe daily’ catchphrase was introduced and Lifebuoy invented the concept of ‘BO’ to sell their soap as advertisers strove to create needs that would increase their markets. They were so successful that today Australians use more toilet soap in a year than any other country!

### **General tonics**

Patent medicines, which by the 1930s made up the bulk of tonics, reflected people’s anxieties about illnesses and claimed to prevent and cure a large proportion of them.

Tonics and remedies for aches and pains were big sellers. They promised to build up the weak, alleviate stress and renew self esteem. They even claimed to improve chances of marriage!

Strong emphasis was put on the dangers of constipation which were said to include blemished skin, poor performance at work and cranky children. Chemists sold a wide variety of remedies made from castor oil to senna pods and if all else failed enemas were recommended!

### **Interactive**

You can use a video interactive to ask a 1930s chemist for advice about your health problems.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

Select questions that will help your students interpret the exhibition. If necessary, adapt the questions to suit the ability of your group. The answers can be found by looking at the objects, photographs and labels, and by using the interactive (hands-on) exhibits.

### **Look at the display on the 1880s' dispensary.**

Look at the tools that the chemist used to make medicines. Use the label guide to name as many of the tools as you can. What was the purpose of each?

### **Look at the display on chemist shops of the 1930s.**

Find the video interactive on old-fashioned remedies. What advice does the 1930s' chemist give for your 'health problem'?

Look at the advertisements used to sell the products in the 1930s' chemist shop and consider the following questions:

- Whom do you think each product is aimed at?
- What is the buyer being promised?
- What ideas and values are being promoted to the viewer?
- How does the advertisement try to persuade the viewer to buy the product?

For details of other exhibitions and ways that students can visit the Powerhouse Museum, consult the current *Powerhouse teachers guide* or **call** (02) 9217 0222 or **fax** (02) 9217 0441 or **email** edserv@phm.gov.au

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