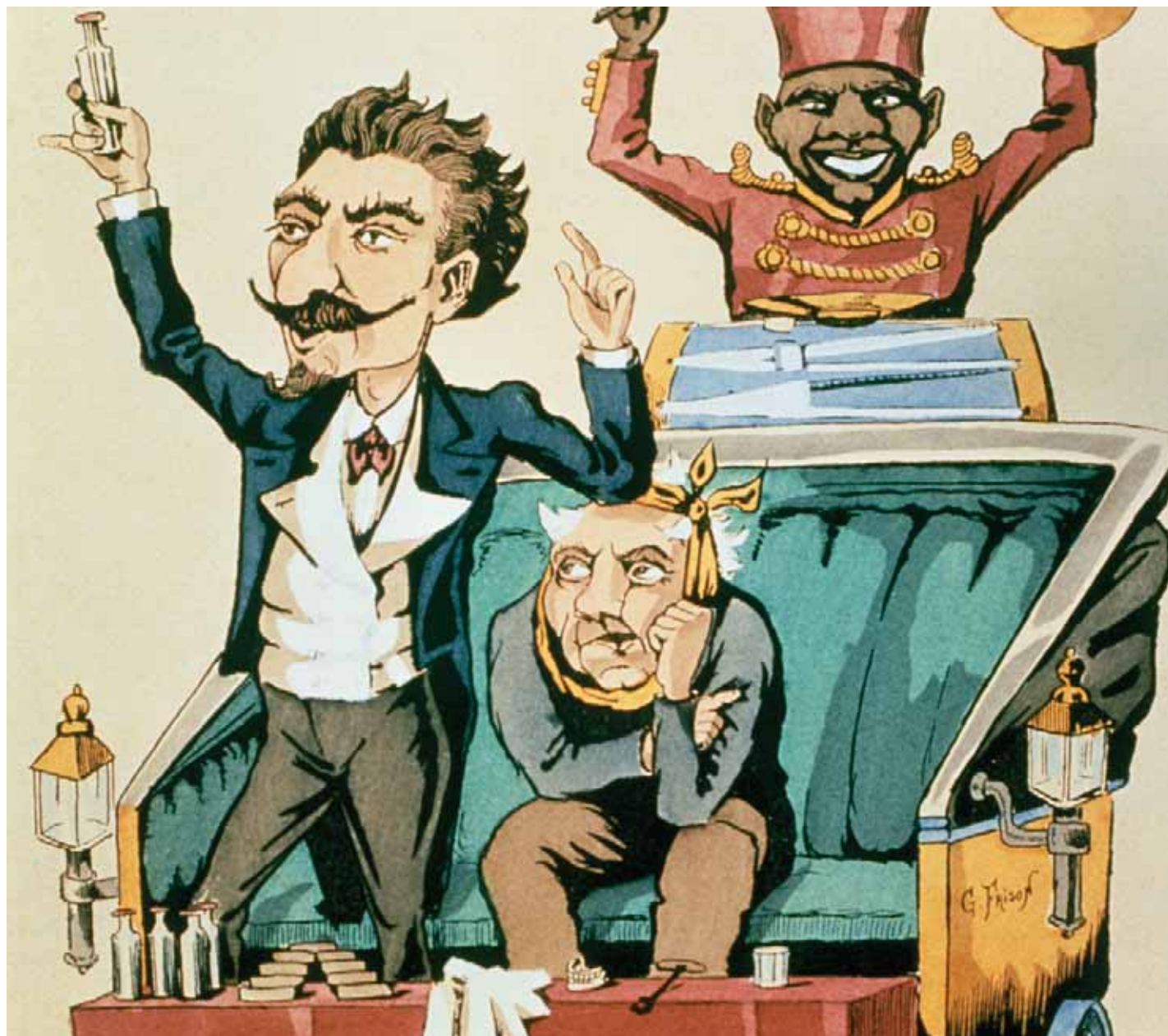


Quackery: a barely believable history

Quackery has had a colourful history and, often, an improbable one. Ray Sturgess has been into the archives



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Quackery is as old as medicine. Indeed, for most of its history, medicine was quackery. Even during the ancient Greek and Roman era, when doctors emerged as professionals, they gave out concoctions no more scientific than did the amateur healers. For example, a theriac (so-called because its base was treacle — *theriaca* in Latin), widely used by doctors in Asia Minor around 100 BC contained 71 ingredients, including vipers' flesh and ground up lizard.

Dioscorides in the 1st century AD tried to introduce some rationality into prescribing, although how little progress had been made is illustrated by the inclusion in his five volume *'De materia medica'*, of a monologue on a compound of bed bugs mashed with meat and beans and recommended for malarial

fevers. Cinnamon and cassia were stated to be effective against snake bites and menstrual disorders, and the common bramble, *Rubus fruticosus*, not only was described as a useful hair dye but was effective in diarrhoea (put quaintly in an early English translation as "stops ye belly"). Bramble, Dioscorides also opined, strengthened the gums and healed running ulcers in the head. The snake oil peddlers of the American West were, by comparison, relatively modest in their claims.

As the medical profession gradually assumed a higher social status, the division between trained physicians and quacks became more apparent. The quacks peddled mostly herbal remedies that provided relief for some — those who had sufficient belief. Doctors prescribed the same remedies, but from loftier

heights. Their years of training at universities and the fees they charged ensured that the solid burghers who could afford to call in a doctor got the full benefit of any placebo effects.

In France, after the Revolution, the monopoly of the old universities in licensing doctors was abruptly ended and, for a time, for a modest fee anyone could acquire a permit to practise medicine. Napoleon made use of the revolutionary fervour in France to get to the top but was essentially a law-and-order man. When he got into power, he brought in a licensing system that required doctors and surgeons to undergo four years of medical education before they could practise. However, it is doubtful if the populace at large would have noticed much difference.

In medicine, as in other fields, the introduction of newspapers containing advertisements brought big changes. Quack medicines that had been compounded in the back room of an apothecary's or huckster's premises and that had enjoyed merely a local reputation could now be advertised to a wider clientele. When national newspapers appeared, quackery was available to everyone. In 18th century England it became common for middle class households to stock a supply of patent medicines and alongside harmless quack remedies like Daffy's Elixir (a mixture of senna and spices) sat more hazardous ones, such as Doctor James Fever Powder (a preparation containing antimony). The fraudulence of the quack remedies lay more in the claims made for them than in the bizarre nature of their ingredients. For example, the large sales of Brodum's Cordial and similar "restoratives" were stimulated by the claim that they could rectify the damage done by masturbation.

The mass marketing of dubious remedies through newspapers and other widely-distributed publications reached its heyday in the US in the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, although this phenomenon had begun much earlier. In 1692, the founding fathers (or at least their sons and daughters) were reading in the *Boston Almanac* a heartening announcement that an "Excellent Antidote against all Manner of Gripings called *Aqua Anti Torminales*, which if timely taken, it not only cures the Griping of the Guts, and the Wind Cholick; but prevented that woeful Distemper of the Dry Belly Ache" was available. Presumably, the news was even more heartening for the classical scholars who knew that *tormina* was Latin for colic.

The Americans may not have invented advertising, but they were the first to go in for mass production, led by the pioneering efforts of Henry Ford. Mass marketing was another American first, and well to the fore in this field were the peddlers of quack medicines. The quacks of the western frontier worked from covered wagons and relied on verbal enticements to offload their snake oil or "Cherokee liniment". Their counterparts in the more civilised states back east stirred their vats in backrooms and relied on press advertising to keep the orders coming in.

Quackery reached its peak in the 19th century, through a combination of a general ignorance of the causes of disease and a gullible public. With the aid of a catchy name and good advertising, fortunes could be made in months or even, sometimes, in weeks. The ingredients did not matter: caramel could be (and usually was) added to give a dark rich look to a liquid. The top sellers were all liquids. Purchasers believed that potions of herbal origin needed to have been stewed and stirred in cauldrons to be genuine. Pills did not have the same reassuring appearance and tablets had not yet been invented.

Sarsaparilla kings

Before the quack medicine business really took off in about 1850, there were signs of

things to come in an upsurge in sales of preparations of an old botanic favourite, sarsaparilla root. Sarsaparilla had been in vogue once before, in Europe in the 16th century when it was introduced as a treatment for syphilis. Being ineffective against that disease its use declined in Europe but, in America, where there was a tradition of using sarsaparilla as a "blood purifier", there was a resurgence of interest in the root in the early 19th century.

The standard form of blood purifier was a mixture of sulphur and molasses — in reality, a mild laxative — and sarsaparilla preparations began to eat into this market. It became a routine for people to dose themselves with sarsaparilla in the spring, eliminating from the blood poisons accrued in the system during the winter. The more dedicated manufacturers imported the tropical pharmacopoeial sarsaparillas (included in the British Pharmaceutical Codex 1943), *Smilax officinalis* and *S medica* (or *S ornata*), but many backroom operators made do with the native wild sarsaparilla, *Aralia nudicaulis*.

One of the earliest sarsaparilla kings was C. C. Bristol. He was one of the few not to attach an "MD" to his name, but he made up for this by the eloquence of his advertising blurb, which was riddled with unctuous references to the "laws of nature". After a decade, he pointed out that "10 years is at least too long for a hoax to live". It was true that Bristol's Sarsaparilla had seen off many minor brands, but its success enticed others to try their hand. There appeared Dr Townsend's Sarsaparilla, "a Wonder and a Blessing". Dr Easterly's version was "Six Times Stronger" and had (it was claimed) in three years, cured 3,000 cases of scrofula, 2,500 patients with liver, dropsy and gravel complaints, 1,500 female complaints and, more remarkably, 6,000 syphilitic or venereal coughs. But the possibilities were far from exhausted and the sarsaparilla merchants soon had to contend with a compound rejoicing in the name of Dr Radway's Sarsaparilla Renovating Resolvent. Not many knew what a resolvent was, but it sounded impressive and sold by the million.

In the end they were all overtaken by James Cook Ayer, of Lowell, Massachusetts, the only sarsaparilla merchant to have a genuine medical degree, secured at the University of Pennsylvania in 1841. Returning to Lowell, Ayer bought a drugstore with money borrowed from an uncle. His ventures into patent medicine selling enabled him to repay the loan in three years. Ayer produced a line of family remedies, including Ayer's Cherry Pectoral (for pulmonary ailments), a hair invigorant, an ague remedy and Ayer's Extract of Sarsaparilla, which was to make his fortune.

Late in life, Ayer explained the success of his remedies by pointing out that as Americans went west they lived in scattered communities without doctors and they had to doctor themselves. These citizens were not necessarily deprived — in 1870, the head of the Harvard Medical School revealed that he did not set written examinations because

most of the students could not write well enough to provide answers.

The sarsaparilla kings had, at least, the benefit of peddling a well-known herbal product. Greater credit must, therefore, go to the brothers Andral and Jonas Kilmer of Binghamton, New York, who made a fortune from the lesser known "swamp root". Andral Kilmer had managed to get a medical degree and Jonas had attended a business school — a potent combination. They started off by making Autumn Leaf Extract for Females, Ocean Weed Heart Remedy and the graphically named Prompt Parilla Liver Pills but, after marketing Swamp Root, the brothers soon realised that this was their path to fortune. Although the Kilmer brothers never revealed the identity of Swamp Root, it was most probably the root of *Saururus cernuus*, the swamp lily.

One day Andral came up with the inspired advertising slogan "Thousands have Kidney Trouble and Don't Know It". Having set the alarm bells ringing in the minds of his readers, he then listed 56 symptoms of kidney trouble. Since there was almost no one on the planet, or at least in America, who could not identify with one or more of these symptoms, sales of Swamp Root rocketed. The icing was put on the cake by printing circulars advising readers to try out a simple test which involved taking a glass, filling it with urine and letting it stand for 24 hours. If a sediment appeared, the kidneys were unhealthy. As a doctor, Kilmer must have known that any specimen of urine left to stand will produce a deposit but, like all great quack peddlers, he was able to blind himself to the facts under the delusion that he was doing mankind a service.

"Authentic native remedies"

The notion of the folklore wisdom of the North American Indians entered into the consciousness of the Americans at about the same rate as they robbed these indigenous tribes of their lands. The quacks were quick to latch on to the marketing possibilities, early on choosing names with Indian associations to give credibility to their herbal products. The headquarters of one such was Corry, Pennsylvania but, to add authenticity to their medicines, they chose as their operating title the Oregon Indian Medicine Company, suggesting a connection with the far west where there were still Indian homelands. By a coincidence, when the company decided to use medicine shows to increase sales, they recruited a true Oregonian, Donald McKay, to take to the road with their wares. Usually, one or two Indians in head-dresses and other native garb were hired to front the show. McKay was impressed when the company fitted him out with a \$40 buckskin suit and a \$16 hat. He was also impressed by the fact that orders from drugstores for the top seller, the tonic Ka-Ton-Ka, could make the company \$2,000 in two days.

McKay's sales pitch was that all the ingredients of Ka-Ton-Ka and the company's

other products (one was McKay's Indian Worm Eradicator) were roots gathered by Indian women of the Modoc and Nez Perce tribes in Oregon. When the federal authorities eventually caught up with the company and prosecuted it for fraudulent advertising, Ka-Ton-Ka was found to contain sugar, aloes, and baking soda, plus the secret ingredient of all the best-selling American quack remedies, which will be revealed later.

The most enterprising of the quack sellers was the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, whose vast four-storey headquarters was on Grand Avenue in New Haven, Connecticut. From this barn issued forth 25 grandly named medicine touring shows, which consisted of painted wagons with let-down sides to serve as a stage. A record exists of the sales pitch of the leading showman, Doc Healy, for the company's liver pads: "These pads, ladies and gentlemen, contain no harmful chemicals, but a potent, carefully proportioned mixture of roots, barks, gums, leaves, oils and berries. When the pad is applied to the aching spot, the warmth of the body releases the medicinal qualities of the herbs which penetrate directly to the ailing spot. Be careful to place the red spot on the pad exactly over the seat of the disorder." The pads, when later analysed, were found to contain sawdust and the red spot was added using glue and red pepper.

Lydia E. Pinkham

Although the American kings of quackery rapidly became millionaires, none could compare in terms of fame and fortune with Lydia Estes Pinkham. Born in 1819 in Lynn, Massachusetts, Lydia Estes was a bright scholar and grew to an impressive five feet ten inches topped by flaming red hair. In 1843 she married Isaac Pinkham, a kindly and affable widower with plenty of ideas of how to make money, but not the vigour to implement them. He need not have worried. His wife had enough energy for both of them and within a decade she would become the most widely known woman in America, outshining even Louisa May Alcott, the author of 'Little women'.

The Pinkhams got off to a slow start. Isaac tried his hand at farming and manufacturing kerosene but neither venture succeeded. It was his kind nature that eventually produced rewards. Isaac signed a guarantee note for \$25 for a friend, George Todd, and when Todd was unable to pay his debts, Isaac had to pay up. All Todd could do to recompense Isaac was to give him a recipe for a supposed "cure for the weaknesses of females". Isaac handed the recipe to his wife, a worker for temperance and the abolition of slavery, and a fierce opponent of the bleeding and purging school of medicine then at its height in America.

Lydia thought that Todd's formula was promising but could be improved upon. She had long been brewing remedies for herself and her four children, inspired by 'The American dispensatory', a massive compendium of botanic lore. Lydia removed one

or two ingredients from Todd's formula and added two of her own. These were *Aletris farinose* and *Asclepias tuberosa*, although she probably knew them by their more charismatic common names, true unicorn and pleurisy root.

Unlike her male counterparts in the home remedy field, Lydia Pinkham's motives for distributing her botanic restorative were philanthropic, and she started by giving it away to friends and neighbours. Lydia continued to dole out her "vegetable compound" to all in

philanthropy shows through among the huckstering:

*A FEARFUL TRAGEDY,
a clergyman of Stratford, Connecticut
KILLED BY HIS OWN WIFE,
Insanity Brought on by 16 years of Suffering with
FEMALE COMPLAINTS THE CAUSE.
Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound,
The Sure Cure for These Complaints,
Would Have Prevented the Direful Deed.*

The Pinkhams were amazed by the response. They were also unprepared and, for a time, demand threatened to swamp production. They responded by creating a purpose-built manufacturing unit in Lynn. Eventually, this was expanded and became the main factory, providing jobs for around 450 people. Lydia E. Pinkham was already a household name but soon her face was to become equally familiar. Daniel Pinkham, the most enthusiastic of her sons, was passing the offices of *The Boston Herald* and, on impulse, went in and asked what it would cost to put his mother's picture in an advertisement on the front page. Sixty dollars was the reply. Daniel had just collected that amount from a drugstore and he handed it over.

The result was astonishing. Wholesalers who had been ordering a dozen bottles of the compound at a time now ordered it by the gross. Dan Pinkham persuaded the family to take a \$1,000 mortgage on their home and handed it over to *The Herald* for a series of front-page advertisements. National advertising followed and soon the face of Lydia E. Pinkham was the best known of any woman in America.

The secret ingredient

However, even the virtuous Lydia Pinkham, it transpired, had resorted to the most common trick of the quack medicine manufacturers: she included in her vegetable compound the one ingredient that guaranteed success. The individual who brought this to light was a journalist, Samuel Hopkins Adams, who made it his life's work to expose the evils of the quack medicine trade. Adams was exceptional for a reporter of those days in that he was a college graduate. He travelled the US gathering the facts before launching his opening salvo in *Collier's Magazine* in October 1905. Adams informed surprised readers that the patent medicine trade relied on one ingredient for its success: alcohol. Detailing the alcohol content of the most successful home remedies, he concluded that more alcohol was consumed in the US in patent medicines than was sold legally as spirits. The alcohol content of the quack medicines varied between 20 and 25 per cent and the doses recommended were liberal — often a wineglassful several times a day. It seems that the American public was hooked on quack medicines laced with alcohol.

In the UK, the biggest selling quack medicines relied on a different magic ingredient for their success. While Americans were oc-



need until 1873 when Isaac's latest venture in property speculation failed dramatically. The Pinkhams were left almost penniless. Even then, Lydia continued to give away her vegetable remedy, with no thought of selling it, until one day there arrived at her front door two strangers in an elegant carriage. They had come to enquire about Mrs Pinkham's vegetable compound and, if possible, to purchase six bottles. For once, Lydia put practicality before philanthropy and set a price of \$5 for the six bottles.

Now that providence had shown the way, Lydia set about manufacturing her vegetable compound for sale. Within a year or two most drugstores in New England were stocking Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. The Pinkham children joined in the enterprise and, before long, advertisements for the family product were appearing in newspapers and magazines. Lydia contributed the wording of the advertisements and in the following example some of her essential

cupied with conquering the West, Britons were conquering the world with the products of their industrial revolution. Slums sprang up in every manufacturing town to house the agricultural workers flocking in to work in factories for a pittance that, with wives taking up factory work as well as their husbands, was higher than the pittance the men had received as farm workers.

With mothers going out to work and not having enough money for baby minders, the infants and children were left at home. To keep their babies quiet, the mothers dosed them with a "soothing syrup" before leaving for the factory. A favourite was Godfrey's Cordial, made according to various formulae and by any number of compounders. The ingredients typically were treacle, an essential oil (usually saffras or caraway), alcohol, plus the magic ingredient. Another best seller, using the image of a wise woman blessed with a special recipe, was Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup. Less subtly named, and more to the point, was Street's Infant Quietness. Several, glossing over

the sedative aspect, made other therapeutic claims. Dalby's Carminative suggested digestive benefits, while Atkinson's Infant Preservative gave the impression that it provided against all eventualities.

The one thing all the baby soothing remedies had in common was that they exerted their sedation by means of opium, included in the form of laudanum. While mothers were enduring the cacophony of a mill room crammed with clattering machines, their babies were under the influence of opium dreams.

In the 19th century the peddling of opium in quack remedies was not confined to the cradle trade. Cure-alls containing laudanum were widely popular, the most famous and enduring being Collis Browne's Chlorodyne. Its inventor, John Collis Browne, devised the compound in 1848 while he was serving with the army in India. While on leave in England in 1854, he was called upon to help with a cholera outbreak in Trimdon, County Durham. Realising the potential of his rem-

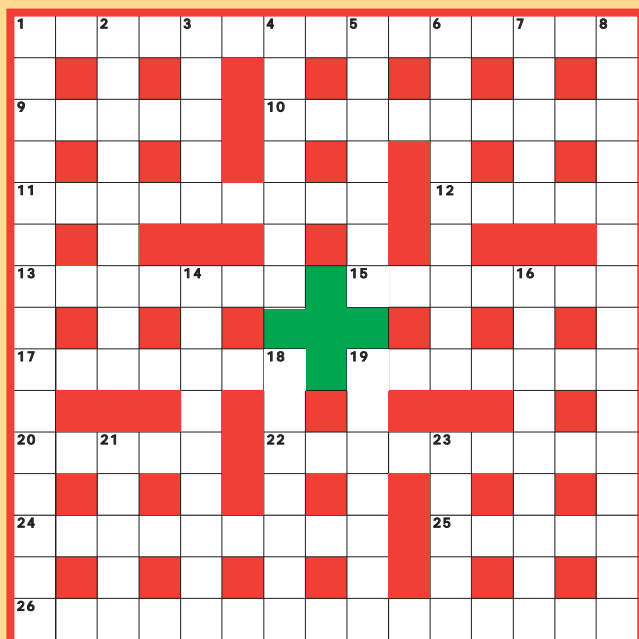
edy, the active ingredients of which were morphine and chloroform, Browne gave it the name Chlorodyne, a combination of chloroform and anodyne. As a tribute to the potency of morphine, Collis Browne's Chlorodyne (minus the chloroform) stands on pharmacy shelves today, presided over by the figure of Dr Browne, still pictured on the label.

Conclusion

Few subjects better illustrate the bizarre and eccentric side of human nature than the history of quackery. The word itself is probably from the old Dutch quacksalver (now *kwakzalver*), meaning one who "quacks" or hawks his salves. One of the many hardly credible aspects of quackery is that the two most common ingredients of the best selling quack remedies were those pharmacopoeial stalwarts, alcohol and opium. For centuries, in the West at least, these were the only effective analgesics and euphorants. In a final twist to this tale, it turns out that most quack medicines were scarcely quackery at all.

Christmas crossword puzzle

Solve our crossword and get the chance to win a replica leech jar. Copied from a 19th century original, the hand-finished jars are in production in Germany. The winning entry will be drawn on 3 January 2006. Entries should be sent to The Editor, *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN. They should be marked "Crossword" and should include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Do not send any other material with the entry. The editor's decision is final.



Across

- 1. I help monarch in distress. Pass the antibiotic (15)
- 9. Demon returned and escaped destruction (5)
- 10. Arrest Lloyds underwriters for familiar designations (9)
- 11. Antihypertensive one takes half way through the month (9)
- 12. On regularly taking tablets, ears undergo change (5)
- 13. Post-holder requires body armour and batsman's shield (7)
- 15. Turn back bloody headless dog (7)
- 17. With leader absent, listened to strange tympanum (7)
- 19. Sadly disheartened representative has car check-up setback — indication that something is faulty (7)
- 20. On returning, I pen an antelope (5)
- 22. Girl and a chap represented in diagrammatical form (9)
- 24. I take cut pasta, a sort of hoop, as a laxative (9)
- 25. Bellini's heroine displays some abnormalities (5)
- 26. After London police trainee is found in grip of brief stroke, I have rendezvous with CNS stimulant (15)

Down

- 1. To get potassium removing product, Monsieur goes crazy after bone mineral (7,8)
- 2. Oil varies appallingly for Parisian chemist (9)
- 3. Endlessly phone again to obtain larva of parasitic worm (5)
- 4. Branded antidepressant makes capsized Marine cross (7)
- 5. Disrupter of speeches delivers mild oath to sovereign queen (7)
- 6. Ordered returning satellite to embrace new currency (3-6)
- 7. See space traveller arrive on time (5)
- 8. After Uri's Deli disaster, man consumed dopaminergic drug (8,7)
- 14. Crooner, grasping decorative vase, starts to love you in a fiery way (9)
- 16. Take a bit of éclair, a citrus turnover. That's rash (9)
- 18. Important person puts pressure on sucker, with hesitation (7)
- 19. Recognise a gun concealed in outlet to the ocean (7)
- 21. Popular place for addition of data (5)
- 23. Language of snobbish individuals (5)