



## Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

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Please note that these are the personal opinions of the author and do not necessarily represent those of AstraZeneca.

# Formulating fortunes – the tale of a medicated lozenge

Much has been written recently concerning entrepreneurial activity in some Schools of Pharmacy in the UK resulting in spin-off companies with new ideas in drug delivery or manufacture. Much has also been made of the involvement of pharmacists [1], so much so that one might think that this was a new phenomenon. However, this is not the case; pharmacists over the years have often been at the forefront of activity in this area and some have certainly made fortunes with products that have become household names. A noteworthy example in the UK, and one that is well worth examining, is that of James Lofthouse.

### A brief history

James Lofthouse was born in Lancaster (England, UK) in 1842 and opened his pharmacy in Fleetwood on the Fylde coast in 1865. At that time Fleetwood was a growing fishing port and home of the North Atlantic fishing trawlers teeming with fishermen suffering from various bronchial complaints. Seizing the opportunity, James formulated an extra strong bronchial mixture containing

menthol, eucalyptus oil, capsicum and liquorice designed to be dropped onto sugar cubes and sucked [2]. Unfortunately, glass bottles were not the ideal containers for his customers, who complained that they broke in rough seas. Consequently, he reformulated the mixture into a solid form – a lozenge consisting of the same ingredients dispersed in a sugar and gum base massed with water, which was then rolled, cut into shapes and oven dried. Such was the popularity of this formulation that fishermen constantly came into his pharmacy requesting ‘an ounce of friends’ or ‘a bag of fisherman’s lozenges’ – hence the origin of the famous brand name ‘Fisherman’s Friend’ [3].

James Lofthouse died on 21 May 1906, aged 64, and his family continued to manufacture the lozenge in the pharmacy almost exclusively for the local market along the Fylde coast. Here the story would have ended were it not for Doreen Lofthouse, wife of Tony, James’ grandson, who with her mother-in-law, Frances, decided it was time to promote the product further afield. In 1963, a

private limited company (Lofthouse of Fleetwood) was set up to market the product. Such was the success of the venture that in 1969 the family purchased a disused tram shed nearby for £3000, equipped it with a second-hand packaging machine for a further £3000 and expanded manufacture [4]. Within two years, demand had outstripped supply, new premises were sought and a new factory, 2200 m<sup>2</sup> in area, was built and opened in 1972. Further expansion in the mid-1980s and 1990s has seen the size of the factory rise to 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> with staff increasing from eight, in the early 1970s, to nearly 300 in 1997.

### Product range

Active components of the original extra strong lozenge, together with a slightly less strong aniseed version introduced in 1976, are shown in Table 1 [5]. What is immediately apparent is the relatively high level of menthol in the original product. Liquorice extract was often included in bronchial lozenges because it also acted as a binding agent. Eucalyptus oil and tincture of capsicum were also often included although the inclusion of cubeb oil is a mystery. The formulation was certainly designed to have a strong flavour!

### *A product proven by time itself*

Of course, over the years, the ingredients have changed slightly and the product range has expanded as the company has kept pace with changing tastes and fashions, especially in the export market. In 1980, the first sugar-free variant was introduced, mainly as a response to the Scandinavian market. A super-strong mint product followed in 1983, and in 1991 a sugar-free mint variant (now the premier variant) was introduced. Subsequently, sugar-free lemon, apple and cinnamon, and salmiak (ammonium chloride) versions have been manufactured, although not for all markets

(<http://www.fishermansfriend.co.uk/products.htm>). Currently, the company manufactures 1.2 million packets of these variants a day, using machines that can produce 400,000 lozenges an hour; a far cry from the days of hand production where output rarely exceeded 6000 lozenges a day.

### Successful company

At present the company exports to 115 countries and has won three Queen's Awards for Export, the first in 1983, eight years after their first export order of one case of lozenges to Norway. Perusal of the annual accounts [6] reveals a highly successful company with a turnover in 1997 of £32,619,000 and a profit before tax of £13,065,000, leading to a return on sales of 40%.

What can we learn from this success? How can it be that a product formulated some 150 years ago is still such a successful revenue earner? First, the company has a major international brand instantly recognisable throughout

the world and able to be defended in the courts (this happened in 1990 when a rival product called 'Bosun's Mates' appeared at the annual world sweet fair in Cologne, Germany). Second, because the product is perceived differently in different countries (in some it is regarded as a medicated lozenge for bronchial complaints, in others it is regarded as a flavoured sweet) the company is able to expand its range of variants to cover all tastes and fashions, while still maintaining its brand. Third, the efficacy of the product has been proven not only by time itself but also through the endorsements of the famous (it is reported that Margaret Thatcher used them to ease her throat after public speaking and Plácido Domingo to ease his throat after singing). Food for thought for all the budding entrepreneurs hoping to formulate their fortunes!

### References

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