



Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

Column by Raymond C. Rowe, AstraZeneca, UK

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

Famous formulations – Andrews Liver Salt

In the mid 1950s, a proprietary medicine that, it was claimed, was present in every other home in the UK was Andrews Liver Salt. Manufactured by a small company, Scott and Turner in Newcastle upon Tyne in England, it was a free-flowing, granular powder containing tartaric acid 23%, sodium bicarbonate 23%, magnesium sulphate dihydrate 17% and sucrose 37% [1], packed in a distinctive white lever-lid tin with black lettering.

The product was sold in two sizes, the standard size retailing at one shilling and ten pence (approximately nine new pence, or 0.13 Euro), the family size retailing at two shillings and ten pence (approx. 14 new pence or 0.20 Euro). The dose was 1–2 teaspoonfuls in a glass of water. At that time the adverts stressed the fact that 'Sparkling Andrews refreshes the mouth and helps clean the tongue. Effervescent Andrews is antacid; soothes your stomach; corrects digestive upsets; tones up the liver and checks biliousness. Pleasant-tasting Andrews gently clears the system, thus promoting inner cleanliness'. I can remember my family using it for

whenever anyone felt 'under the weather', a catch all for not feeling well.

The product is an interesting one, not for its active ingredient because magnesium sulphate has always been used as a laxative producing watery stools with little or no griping, but for its history and intense brand loyalty.

'Andrews for inner cleanliness.'

History

Little is known of how the formula originated, only that it was invented by William Henry Scott, a margarine importer and commission agent, and William Turner Murdoch, a provision agent operating from premises in Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1890s [2]. It is probable that both would have dealt with magnesium sulphate or Epsom Salts and that both would have known that, in a solution equivalent in concentration (approx 1.3%) to that of the spring water obtained from specific wells in both Epsom, England, and Seidlitz, in the Czech Republic, a tumbler full would have been recommended for 'conditions of

the stomach, hypochondriasis, amenorrhoea, and the anomalous complaints succeeding the cessation of catamenia (menstruation), oedematous tumours of the legs in literary men, haemorrhoidal affections, and scorbutic eruptions' [3].

Unfortunately, magnesium sulphate is extremely bitter and the taste needed masking through the incorporation of sweeteners and effervescing agents.

The product took its name from the tiny eleventh century church of St Andrews opposite Scott and Turner's premises in Newcastle upon Tyne and was originally marketed for indigestion, headache, biliousness, constipation, liver and kidney disorders and rheumatism. It was packed in large glass jars and sold to coal miners and sailors in what was known as penny and halfpenny twists, consisting of a piece of flat paper twisted to form a small bag in which the powder was dispensed [2]. However, difficulties caused by the product becoming caked in the jars due to the ingress of moisture and the inevitable breakages



Figure 1. The product as advertised on playing cards in the 1950s.

caused the primary pack to be changed to the lever-lid tin in 1909. With the exception of the Second World War, when Andrews was packed in treated cardboard containers, the product remained in a tin until recently when it was replaced by a polypropylene container.

Despite the company expanding and changing hands, becoming Phillips, Scott and Turner in the 1960s, Sterling Health Products in 1972, SmithKlineBeecham Consumer Healthcare in 1995 and then, recently, GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare, the formula has changed little over the years. In the 1960s a formula for diabetics was introduced containing saccharin sodium instead of sucrose, and in the 1970s tartaric acid was replaced with anhydrous citric acid. The indications for the product have narrowed somewhat to include 'indigestion, upset stomach, excess acid, constipation and symptoms of over-indulgence', and the words 'Liver Salt' were dropped in the 1990s. Of course its price has increased nearly 30-fold since the 1950s.

Branding and brand loyalty

How is it that a product invented over a century ago is still on the shelves of pharmacies today relatively unchanged? First and foremost, the efficacy of the product has been proven by time itself.

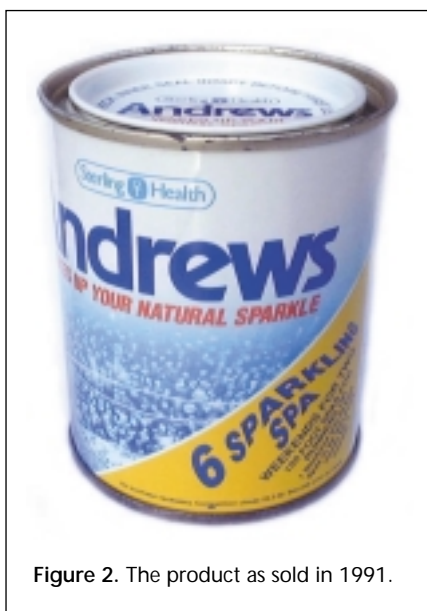


Figure 2. The product as sold in 1991.

Second, and probably more importantly, there has been an intense brand loyalty over the years.

Scott and Turner were pioneers in the branding and advertising of their product. By the 1920s they had already introduced coupons, gift schemes and competitions. Customers were encouraged to save lids from the tins and exchange them for prizes in the form of cash, gold watches, fountain pens, silver thimbles and even toothbrushes and playing cards (Figure 1). Competitions were still in vogue even in the early 1990s – the tin shown in Figure 2 has a competition for a 'spa weekend for two'. In the 1920s it

was estimated that an Andrews advert reached every person in the UK at least once a week – an outstanding feat considering that television had not become commonplace. Slogans reacted to the changing life-styles of the population from 'keeps you fit' and 'wards off the ills of life' to the famous 'Andrews for inner cleanliness'. The slogan on the tin shown in Figure 2 is 'wakes up your natural sparkle'. Such was their success that in the 1950s it was claimed that there was a 96% awareness of the product in the UK [2].

When sales in the UK began to level off, export markets were opened up and tins were printed in no less than 18 languages. The product also has an international presence: I recently came across the Dutch product – Andrews Laxeerzout. It would appear that 'zout' means salt and that 'laxeer' comes from the verb 'laxeren' meaning to open the bowels. 'Opening the bowel salt' is certainly a more correct description of the product than 'Liver salt'!

Will the product last another century? Only time will tell!

References

- 1 Martindale The Extra Pharmacopoeia (1961) (24th edn suppl.) The Pharmaceutical Press, London
- 2 Baren, M. (1997) *How Household Names Began*, pp. 10–11, Past Times, Oxford
- 3 Hooper, R. (1839) *Lexicon Medicum: Medical Dictionary*, (7th edn) revised and enlarged by Grant, K. London

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