

The Pars Collection: a window into the past

Dr Holly Crossen-White

Research Fellow, School of Health and Social Care, Bournemouth University, UK

A recent study that sought a 'missing' history of drug-taking during the early twentieth century involved the analysis of some volumes from the Pars Collection. The Pars Collection is a complete set of prescription books from a pharmacy that traded as Pars and Co. Ltd. in Bournemouth between 1876 and 1978. As familiarity with the content of the volumes grew the value of the prescription books went beyond how many times particular drugs were dispensed on any one day. These books conveyed a 'story' about the customers who visited the shop and through them life in Bournemouth at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition, an unexpected finding was that the evidence from this source could be related to other evidence extracted from *The Times* regarding drug consumption during this period.

Overview of the study

The focus of research was upon people who chose to regularly take drugs in the early twentieth century. This was a group of people likely to have left little trace of their lives for future generations to find. At the turn of the century their self-regulated drug consumption would have drawn little attention, they may have been considered morally weak by others¹ but it was a private matter. However, during the first decades of the twentieth century drug consumption came more to public attention, which resulted in the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) Regulation 40b. This meant that those who self-regulated their consumption of drugs were from 1916 committing an offence and thus they naturally sought anonymity to avoid prosecution. In essence, the early twentieth century is a key period in the history of drug-taking as effectively the social status of drug-takers was transformed overnight. It was the impact that DORA Regulation 40b had on the lives of drug-takers which was the focus of this study.

However, to discover the experiences of drug-takers living through this period of great change would be a difficult task. It was necessary to think about how other historians had approached topics where there was a scarcity of evidence. A key strategy for this type of research is to look at archive material in different ways or to 'read against the grain'.² Hobsbawm³ highlights how 'reading against the grain' is employed in the practice of grassroots history. He indicates that grassroots historians work from the assumption that records created for one purpose may in fact accidentally have captured information that provides vital insight to another issue. Thus, for grassroots historians sources only emerge as such

because someone has asked a question and then prospected desperately around for some way – any way – of answering

it. ... There is generally no material until our questions reveal it. (p271).

In this study, accidental capture was the most likely source of evidence and it was important to consider all the potential sources where accidental capture could have occurred. At the turn of the twentieth century individuals purchased their prescriptions and, as the property of the customer, these could be presented at a pharmacy when the owner chose to. Evidence from articles published in *The Times* during the period indicated that using a purchased prescription repeatedly was one way regular drug-takers obtained their drug of choice. Therefore, prescription books were one option that might help trace regular drug-takers during the early twentieth century.

Prescription books are a rarely used but valuable historical source.⁴ They have been used previously to analyse prescribing and professional practice during specific eras.⁵ Reading about the content of prescription books raised the question; might this source hold hidden evidence that could be revealed through a different analytical approach?

The starting point for 'prospecting' prescription books was to review what was recorded in these sources and whether there was a standard format. Establishing this would help assess the consistency of the evidence over time and whether it was possible to trace personal consumption during an extended period of time. Prescription books from several archives were reviewed. This process indicated that records rarely extended over a longer period either because volumes were missing or because the condition of the books was too poor to read all the entries. Also there was no standard approach to recording what the pharmacist dispensed. However, when the Pars collection was traced the quality of records stood out as exceptional and thus this source was focused upon by this study.

Another key source used in this study was *The Times* digital archive. From searches of this source 359 articles were identified and included in the study. These articles reported drug-related incidents that occurred between 1900 and 1922. Their content revealed a great richness of evidence and when this was compared to the analysis of Pars prescribing records it was possible to see similarities and links between the evidence provided by the two sources.

Background to Pars and Co Ltd.

In Bournemouth today older people still refer to Pars Corner because the pharmacy was a key landmark within the town. It attracted attention due to its exotic window displays which at the turn of the century included rare items such as natural sponges from the Mediterranean.⁶ It also had an unusual frontage which was curved. The shape was due to the shop fittings which dated back to the Regency period. These were transported from London to Bournemouth when the pharmacy first opened in 1876 and the shop front modified to accommodate them. When the shop closed the interior went to the Ironbridge Museum. The 124 prescription books found at the shop were preserved also and sent to the Science Museum

Library
consid
is outs
volume
and the
inform
recorde
checke
pharma
'Do no
It is du
are abl

The c
The dis
heroin)
most c
entries
of these
they ne
custom
and se
served
The
and th
entries
were v
visitors
a perso
law at
overco
staff o
particu
visitors
summe
mild w
Bour
tainme
family
enterta
and th
health
London
the cap
'up-ma
listed
affluent
capture
affluent
visitors
Analy
Initial
Collec
during
1922.
from w
the lat
prescri
and the

Library, London. Compared to other prescription books considered for inclusion in this study the Pars Collection is outstanding. On a practical level the condition of the volumes used for this study (1890-1922) was very good and the ink entries remain clear and readable. In terms of information the content is very detailed and meticulously recorded. There is also evidence that entries were cross checked and amended when incorrect. In addition, the pharmacist made comments against prescriptions such as 'Do not repeat'; however, on occasions the dispenser did. It is due to the care taken by the staff that these volumes are able to 'speak' about life during the period.

The customers of Pars and Co. Ltd.

The dispensing of three specific drugs (opium, cocaine and heroin) was focused upon in this study. These drugs were most commonly dispensed to female customers. The entries in the Pars records gave little clue to the background of these female customers but given the profile of the shop they needed to be reasonably affluent. The entries for male customers indicated that there were military connections and searches of UK census records revealed many had served overseas for example, India or South Africa.

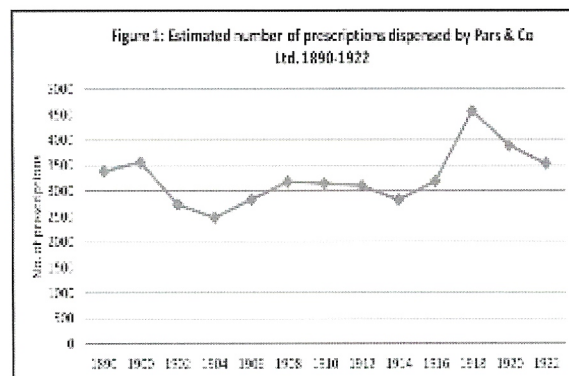
The Pars records included the addresses of customers and this gave another clue to their customer base. The entries indicated that a significant number of customers were visitors staying in hotels. Some were regular visitors over the period but many were not. Dispensing to a person unknown to the pharmacist was in breach of the law at the time. However, it appears that this was overcome by dispensed items being collected by hotel staff or local nurses. The recurrence of customers at particular times of year also indicated that the regular visitors came for particular periods, not always in the summer but at other times. Possibly this relates to the mild winter climate of the area.

Bournemouth was also associated with the entertainment industry particularly through the Russell-Cotes family who were strong supporters of the arts. The family entertained many theatre stars of the day at their home and their hotel, The Royal Bath. The combination of health benefits, celebrity appeal and excellent rail links to London made Bournemouth a fashionable escape from the capital. As Pars & Co. Ltd was considered to be an 'up-market' retailer it is likely that many of the visitors listed in the shop's prescription books were probably affluent Londoners. It seemed that the records had captured an interesting group that were probably quite affluent and included both residents of Bournemouth and visitors to the town.

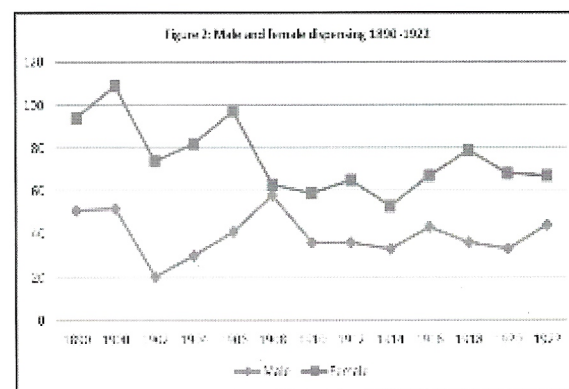
Analysis of the Pars Collection

Initially, the study aimed to analyse the Pars Collection by looking at all dispensed prescriptions during 1890 and then alternate years from 1900 until 1922. The records for 1890 were used as a base year from which to look at the trends in prescribing during the later period 1900 to 1922. To look at the level of prescribing during the period the number of pages per year and the average number of entries per page were recorded

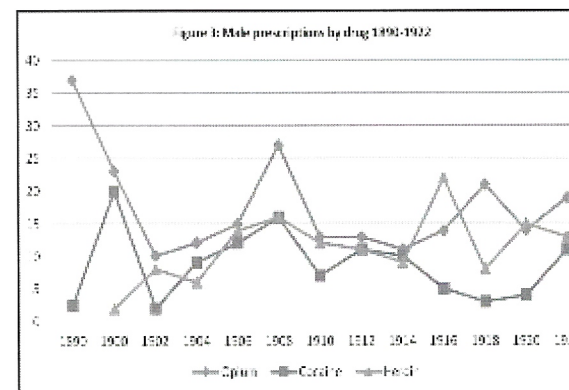
and used to estimate how many prescriptions the premises dispensed in each year analysed. Figure 1 shows the estimated number of prescriptions dispensed at Pars between 1890 and 1922.

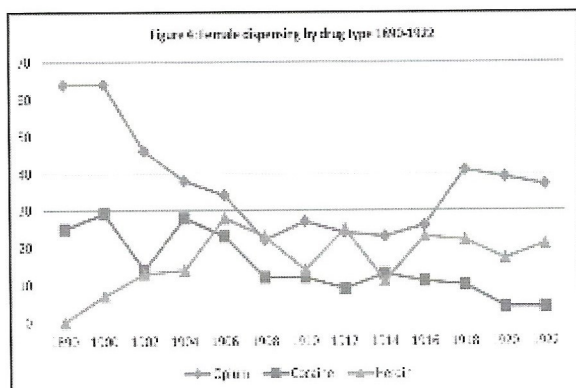


The analysis of the prescription books focused on the dispensing of prescriptions that contained one of three specific drugs, opium, cocaine and heroin.⁷ Subsequent analysis of these prescriptions showed that female customers were much more likely to be dispensed these drugs in most years with the exception of 1908 when male dispensing almost matched that of female customers (see Figure 2).



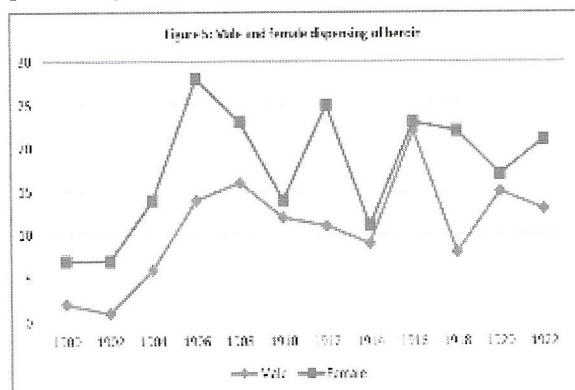
From comparing dispensing trends by gender the male peak in 1908 occurs when dispensing to females is also falling. The reduction in female dispensing begins in 1904 with a decline in prescriptions containing cocaine and then in 1906 there is also a fall in both opium and heroin. However, among male customers there is the





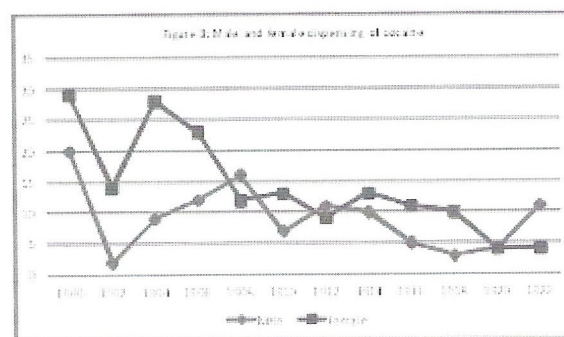
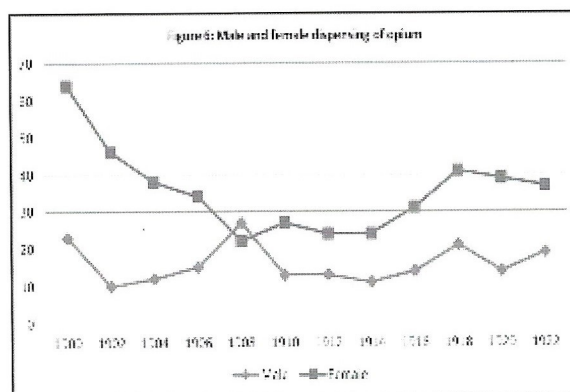
reverse trend. Dispensing to male customers of opium rose from 1902 and then increased very sharply after 1906 while cocaine rose from 1902 and heroin from 1904. A key question was therefore: why was male prescribing the converse of female trends within that period? Figures 3 and 4 show Pars dispensing by drug type for males and females over the period.

Marked variation in dispensing by gender seen in Figures 3 and 4 raises the question: why should there be such trends? The probability is that people with similar conditions should receive similar medications, so prescribing should likewise be similar. It seems unlikely that within the same period that males and females living in Bournemouth had completely different conditions or illness that would require totally different prescribing patterns. The most interesting pattern appears in the prescribing of heroin (see Figure 5).



When looking at Figure 5 the context is relevant. Heroin had only recently come on the market (1898) and the period shown includes the First World War when the population would have been significantly altered with the enlistment of younger males. There may also have been problems with the supply of drugs due to wartime sea blockades⁸ which could have influenced prescribing. Figures 6 and 7 show the dispensing by gender for opium and cocaine over the same period.

A feature across all the drug types is the trend during the war. During this period customers of Pars and Co Ltd. were likely to have been either female or older males. The pattern of dispensing which occurs within this period suggests that either females and older males take similar drugs or the supply of drugs impacted upon what could



be dispensed. Several features make the first assumption quite plausible. Across the data it is possible using the evidence from *The Times* to see points where dispensing behaviour fits with reaction to events that relate to either females or younger males.

As the customers of Pars would have purchased their own prescriptions and paid for consultations with their doctor there is the possibility that they did have some influence over what they received. Looking first at female dispensing; the sharp decline in cocaine dispensing in 1902 could be a reaction to incidents during 1901 and 1902 involving cocaine and females. During July 1901 the deaths of two well-known actresses occurred. Each died from an overdose of cocaine.⁹ The second incident in early 1902 was a civil case involving a regular female drug-taker who took a range of drugs including cocaine.¹⁰ Her state of health was very poor at the time of the trial and her family had her declared insane to place her in treatment. The case was extensively reported in *The Times*. In addition from 1906 there is a fall in all female dispensing across all drugs. This fall coincides with the sale of the first barbiturate, Veronal [barbitone] marketed in 1906.¹¹ This was, in 1906, an unrestricted drug that could be bought without prescription. Given that the pattern of female dispensing for heroin when it was first marketed it is possible that females were switching in 1906 to Veronal, the new 'trendy' drug. Modern research indicates that female drug consumers are much more sensitive to market change than males.¹² Therefore, this movement from one drug to another would fit with female behaviour. Also, the larger study of which this piece of research is one part found that female drug-takers were more risk avoidant. As Veronal was a non-restricted drug it meant that any purchases would go

unrec
custo
migh
Las
Dece
alleg
dispe
recei
legal
sugg
so so
sugg
comm
This
This
Lo
back
presc
a m
overs
presc
return
in the
may
Time
beco
servi
War
assoc
cann
drug
whic
dispe
drug
In
male
shop
1918
perio
male
from
depe
How
1920
and
wou
O
ever
seen
have
Wh
regu
on a
regu
pres
Co
Wh
unc
abo

unrecorded, which would be preferred by female customers, and thus provide another reason why females might have switched from heroin to Veronal.

Lastly, in terms of female dispensing patterns, during December 1918 a very prominent female actress died, allegedly from a cocaine overdose.¹³ Again in the Pars dispensing records there is a fall in the number of females receiving prescriptions containing cocaine. From the legal proceedings after the actress's death, evidence suggests that she also took heroin and had started doing so sometime in mid-1918. Other reports of heroin-taking suggest that heroin consumption may have become more common among female drug-takers from around 1918. This female preference seems to continue into the 1920s. This is a female trend mirrored in the Pars records.

Looking at male dispensing, their professional background could hold a clue as the entries in the prescription books suggested some male customers had a military background, with many having served overseas. Therefore, one theory on the rise in male prescriptions after 1902 is that these males were veterans returning from the Boer War. Possibly they were settling in the town because of its promotion as a health resort or maybe they were visiting on holiday. Articles from *The Times* indicate that some veterans from this conflict had become dependent consumers of drugs while on active service in South Africa. Drug-taking veterans of the Boer War were noted in reports until around 1912. Many were associated with morphine and some cocaine. Morphine cannot be traced in the Pars records, but a likely substitute drug for morphine would be opium, the dispensing of which is rising from 1902. Therefore, rising male dispensing at the shop could be a reflection of a trend for drug-taking among returning Boer war veterans.

In addition, the theory of a link between conflict and male drug-taking fits with other dispensing data from the shop. This shows that male dispensing rose again after 1918, which coincided with demobilisation. In this period, there is also a sharp rise in prescriptions issued to males that contain cocaine or heroin. Again, evidence from *The Times* links First World War veterans to drug dependency, mainly cocaine but occasionally heroin. However, the reporting in *The Times* during the early 1920s strongly associated younger males with cocaine, and the sharp rise in Pars dispensing of cocaine to males would fit this pattern.

On balance the way that trends could be linked to events within the period both for males and females does seem to suggest that the customers of Pars did appear to have some influence over the drugs they accessed. Whether this influence was due to some people self-regulating their drug consumption either occasionally or on a regular basis can only be speculation. However, the regular appearance of some names for repeat prescriptions does point in this direction.

Conclusions

When the analysis of the Pars collection began it was unclear what would emerge; the process was very much about 'prospecting' around for traces of drug-takers.

Given the period and the potential control the public still had over their drug consumption, pharmacy records seemed a potential source for accidental capture of regular drug-takers. However, exploring the Pars Collection revealed much more, some of which was unexpected. The process of discovering a 'missing history' highlighted how important it was to set these records back into the period in which they were created, not just considering the legal context but the wider social elements of day-to-day life. The process also demonstrated how the findings reached may not exactly correspond to the initial questions set but that continued questioning or 'reading against the grain' during the analysis is very important to the outcome of the research.

If there is constant questioning, then as this study shows, the content of pharmacy records can go far beyond professional practice. So prescription books should not be seen as lone sources but important pieces of evidence that when connected to other very different sources can help reveal much more about the public's consumption of drugs.

Author's address: hcrossen@bournemouth.ac.uk

Endnotes and References

1. Davenport-Hines R. *The Pursuit of oblivion: A social history of drugs*. London: Phoenix Press, 2002.
2. Evans R. *In defence of history*. London: Granta, 1997.
3. Hobsbawm E. *On history*. London: Time Warner Book Group UK, 2005.
4. Anderson S. and Homan C. Prescription books as historical sources. *Pharmaceutical Historian* 1999; 29 (4): 51-54.
5. Anderson S and Berridge V. Opium in 20th Century Britain: pharmacists, regulation and the people. *Addiction* 2000; 95 (1): 23-36.
6. Bournemouth Daily Echo, Chemist's open every day for 103 years closing down. *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 1979 16 May: 5a.
7. Morphine would have been a drug of interest but as it was not included in the Pharmacy Act 1868 and the amended 1908 Act there was not the same necessity to record the sale of this drug.
8. Van Emden R. and Humphries S. *All quiet on the home front: An oral history of life in Britain during the First World War*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2003.
9. The Times. Inquests. *The Times* 1901; 20 July: 7f.
10. The Times. Law Report. *The Times* 1902; 26 February: 3d.
11. Parssinen TM. *Secret passions, secret remedies: narcotic drugs in British society 1820-1930*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983.
12. Pacula RL. Women and substance use: Are women less susceptible to addiction? *American Economic Review* 1997; 87(2): 454-459.
13. The Times. Miss Carleton's death 'Doping' parties in flats. *The Times* 1918; 13 December: 3c.