



Mistura Cretae Aromata cum Opio BPC

My career in general practice started in the late 1960s as an assistant to two elderly GPs in a small village on Exmoor in North Devon, England. The doctor's names were Drs Mold and Nightingale, which sounded a bit like a television series, or one of those trade names for bespoke cosmetics or groceries.

Dr Ernest Mold was an eccentric elderly man with a bushy handlebar moustache which was trimmed more on the left side, presumably because he was right-handed. He smoked an old worn-out pipe, which continually needed reigniting, so much of the day was spent striking matches and sucking in. He always wore an old tweed jacket and on at least two occasions, set it alight after putting the still-smoldering pipe in one of the side pockets.

This was in the last fading days of compounding and making up of mixtures with pestles and mortars. This involved an alchemical mystical ritual of mixing cocktails, rather like you see on a BBC food programme. The prescriptions were truly indecipherable to the lay public, with numerous hieroglyphics representing fluid ounces and drachms, followed by a dash of Latin instructions. This was medicine at its most powerful and suggestible.

In the tradition of apothecaries with their apprentices, these two partners handed down to me their favourite formulae. For diarrhoea, if all else failed, Dr Mold liked to prescribe *Mistura Cretae Aromata cum Opio*, BPC. It could turn the Danube into a brick factory. It stood for a mixture of aromatic chalk with opium, as prescribed in the *British Pharmaceutical Codex*, which at that time was the equivalent of Mimms. Conversely, if the patient was constipated, they were given *Mistura Rhej*, which was the equivalent of a good helping of rhubarb and custard.

The prescriptions started at the top with the abbreviation R_x , which can still be seen on some scripts today. It means "take thou". This is the second person singular of the imperative

mood of the transitive verb, *recipere*, to take, (rather obvious, I know, but you may have forgotten your declensions).

There was also a cabalistic mixture for all sorts of pains and distress which we wrote up simply as Mist 15s. From my notes, this was made up of 15 grains of chloral hydrate, 15 minims of nepenthe and 15 grains of mist potassium bromide mixed in 60 minims of syrup of orange. Chloroform water was added to make up half a fluid ounce. You took a teaspoon at night for what must have been a rather splendid night's sleep. "Nepenthe" literally means "the one that chases away sorrow (*ne* = not, *penthos* = sorrow) and was tincture of opium. These mixtures were either made up by the village chemist, or the assistant in the back of the surgery who left the bottles on the outside shelves at the entry to the rooms for patients to pick up after the surgery was closed.

There are still some of these old mixtures around despite the overwhelming power of the modern pill culture. Mist potassium citrate for the bladder, and mist magnesium trisilicate for indigestion, come to mind. Some of my patients still use the potions made up by the old South African chemist, Lennons. There is one called "Essence of Life" (*Lewensessens*) which contained Cape aloes, African ginger, gentian, myrrh, galangal and turmeric. Take one teaspoon when necessary. I should think that with stuff like that in it, it could not help but change your life for the better.

I have whimsically thought of writing a prescription today for *Recipe: mistura cretae cum opio, BPC, signa: bibe cochleatim magnum, ter die sumendus et hora somni, misce secundum artem, phiala agitate*, and then waiting for the distressed pharmacist's telephone call.

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