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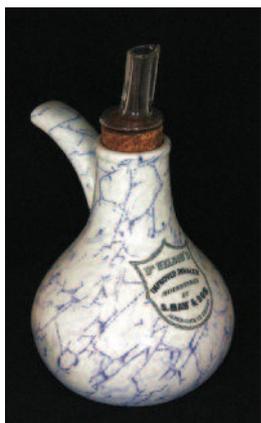
Inhalatorium: A website dedicated to the history of inhalation therapy

An interview with Mark Sanders, Inhalatorium

Inhalation's Editor, Vicki Schuman, caught up recently with Mark Sanders, creator of the inhalatorium.com website, and was able to quiz him about an unusual hobby that has taken him around the world to present at scientific conferences...and into a few murky junk shops.

Mark, what exactly is "inhalatorium" and how did it get started?

Inhalatorium is a website dedicated to the history of all forms of inhalation therapy. I wanted to catalog and share my passion for the history of inhalation therapy, and a website was the obvious tool to achieve that. By 2003, the worldwide web was well established and creation of "home-grown" websites was possible. As far as I could see, there were (and still are) very few dedicated, authoritative sources relating to this history. Inhalation therapy was a common treatment in Victorian times! That's amazing; but how did we get from there to here?



The Dr. Nelson Inhaler, introduced in 1865 and still available today.

What prompted your interest?

Two things really. As a young graduate, I was employed by Fisons (now Sanofi) and was convinced that the Spinhaler[®] was the first dry powder inhaler (DPI). Not correct, as it

turns out. Possibly its novel function coupled with the first preventative, sodium cromoglycate, led to this misconception? Working in the respiratory pharmaceutical industry also brought me into close contact with clinicians with a passion and academic interest in the history of medicine, among them Dr. Ian Gregg¹ who, apart from playing a key role in identifying normal values in asthma, also researched Victorian asthma mortality.

...and the next step?

During meetings at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, I was always the one inspecting display cabinets, looking at inhalation technology curiosities. Then, finding old inhalers at auction led to a home display cabinet. But a Wellcome Trust exhibition really opened my eyes: a researcher had created a 50-item display relating to mosquitos, sourced from eBay[®]. I looked online and, among the items, found a DPI that pre-dated the Spinhaler. I was hooked. I wanted to create an online museum and help ensure that some remarkably clever, early ideas were not forgotten. The earliest DPI reference now appears to be 1848, pre-dating the Spinhaler by more than 100 years.

Why a website? Was that a challenge?

Apart from the sharing aspect, I had heard a number of historical "facts" that weren't altogether correct. I felt that the inventors of the past were getting a raw deal. It also coincided

with a wish to encourage my eldest son who was studying information technology. I taught myself website skills and came to grips with buying online and at auction houses. It has also been great fun sleuthing out hard-to-find devices and bizarre treatment ideas. Overall, I have tried to create an authoritative and factually correct resource that is easy and entertaining to browse.

What about reactions to your website?

It's been fascinating and unpredictable! I have had all sorts: clinicians and scientists seeking lecture materials, theatre producers looking for authentic props, authors wanting to portray their characters with accuracy (the asthmatic cowboy sticks in my mind), treasure hunters wanting to appraise their finds and those who had used some of these products. One enquirer had, as an asthmatic child, smoked asthma cigarettes; he was deeply disappointed to learn of their discontinuation.



Cigarettes were used to treat a variety of diseases, including asthma, hay fever and spasmodic croup.

What difficulties have you encountered?

The early 30-page size of the website did become an issue; adding pages for newly acquired products became clumsy. Also, manually responding to requests for images created time pressure for me. A major overhaul was undertaken in 2014 that has enabled users to download images. I have sometimes been contacted by patients seeking advice on therapy but, understandably, these requestors are always advised to consult their prescribing clinician.

What is your favorite item in the collection?

Definitely the Mudge inhaler.² It has appeal because Dr. John Mudge, FRS (1721-1793) was the first to use the word “inhaler.” The device was, in fact, an adapted pewter tankard and very possibly co-designed with his brother Thomas, who was horologist to King George III. It is hallmarked by the pewter-maker William Barnes, who had premises just two doors away from Thomas’ clockmaker’s shop. I find these historical connections and life experiences fascinating. They have also led me to look, in more detail, at key inventors.³



The 18th century Mudge inhaler, whose inventor, Dr. John Mudge, was the first to use the word “inhaler.”

Are there plans to expand the collection?

Yes, to date, I have steered away from inhalation anesthesia, but recognize that it is probably a major influence on the social acceptability of inhalation medicine, so I want to

expand that side. Also, expanding to the allied field of spirometry makes sense. There is a large library of very old books within the collection. I’d like to bring more of that into the website, if possible. And I would dearly love to add resources to improve the use of inhalers. It’s a particular hobby-horse of mine. I see so many photos of people using inhalers badly. It would be great to provide examples that show correct use and/or clearly identify mistakes.

What aspect of inhalatorium are you most proud of?

The creation of inhalatorium has entailed a lot of personal learning; web design, curatorial skills and book restoration, among others. It has brought me into contact with fellow enthusiasts keen to better understand the paths we have trodden to reach the present day. It has also been really gratifying to see acknowledgements to the site in presentations and papers, and has prompted requests for me to author articles and to present at various meetings. I feel it has clearly reached a level of acceptance.

Mark, thank you for visiting with us. We believe inhalatorium is a fascinating resource for the inhalation community and appreciate your work developing it.

References

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