

The Bane and the antidote; or, poisoning and its suppression.

Contributors

Wilson, Walter.
Royal College of Physicians of London

Publication/Creation

London : Wertheim and Macintosh, Paternoster Row, 1856.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dutxwvsj>

Provider

Royal College of Physicians

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by Royal College of Physicians, London. The original may be consulted at Royal College of Physicians, London. This material has been provided by Royal College of Physicians, London. The original may be consulted at Royal College of Physicians, London. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

THE BANE

AND THE

ANTIDOTE;

OR,

POISONING AND ITS SUPPRESSION.

BY

WALTER WILSON.

"This moves our grief and pity, and we sigh
To think what numbers from these causes die."—*Crabbe*.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

LONDON:

WERTHEIM AND MACINTOSH, PATERNOSTER ROW.

BIRMINGHAM: T. RAGG, HIGH STREET.

1856.

13

THE BANE

AND THE

ANTI-DOTE

ORIGIN AND ITS SUPPRESSION

WALTER ALLISON

LONDON

W. B. ELLIOTT, 1, PATERNOSTER ROW

PRINTED BY W. B. ELLIOTT

1884

THE BANE.

"'Tis you that say it, not I. You do the deeds, and your ungodly deeds find me the words."—*Translated from Sophocles.*

It is a wise remark of one of the most profound and erudite writers on the laws of England, that "The only true and natural foundations of society, are the wants and the fears of individuals." A proper knowledge of these wants, and an appreciation of the fears, is an approximate realization, for supplying the one, and alleviating the other. The duty of the State in its relation to crime, its consequences, prevention, and punishment, in the execution of its legislative functions, is, to enact such laws as will best secure to individuals the greatest security from the perpetrators and instruments of crime. Murder by Poisoning is a moral disease; and Law is a moral, as well as a civil restraint. The aspects of crime abstractedly, and in the aggregate, are invariably the same; whilst its incentives, and means of accomplishment, are subject to mutation. The knife has supplanted the bludgeon, and the battle axe; and the organism of nature, by the revelations of science, and the law's laxity, is converted not only into a fashionable, but the most fearful agent, for the destruction of mankind. Secret poisoning forms a black catalogue in the dark pages of our criminal records. It defies alike the laws of God and man, and smiles in scorn at the efforts of prisons, penitentiaries, Churches, Chapels, the hangman, and the gallows. Its principal causes lie unguarded on the shelves of the chymist, and lurk in the simples of the itinerant quack. Toxicologists explain the mysterious and subtle instruments of death, and mark their presence and action in the human frame, by external and internal symptoms. The contradictory deductions, and "tetanic complications" of Medical

Professors make wise men tremble, good men sad, and bad men bold; they encourage the reprobate in his onward career of guilt, and doubly arm the secret poisoner with a scientific cause for the commission of crime; whose victims drop like withered leaves in autumn, and fall beneath the influence of his dark and stealthy dealings like a fabled fate.

The following compilation by Professor Christison, taken from the returns made by the Coroners of England, for the two years ending 1838, shew some of the

Poisons generally used :—

1. <i>Arsenical.</i>	White Arsenic	185	
	Yellow ditto	1	
		—	186
2. <i>Acids.</i>	Sulphuric Acid.....	32	
	Nitric Acid	3	
	Oxalic Acid	19	
		—	54
3. <i>Mercurials.</i>	Corrosive Sublimate ...	12	
	White Mercury	1	
	Turbith Mineral	1	
	Mercury (?)	1	
		—	15
4. <i>Other Mineral Irritants.</i>	Tartar-emetic	2	
	Sulphate of Iron	1	
	Chloride of Tin	1	
	Subacetate of Lead ...	1	
	Bicrom. of Potash	1	
	Percussion Powder	1	
	Carbon. of Potash	1	
	Black Ash.....	1	
		—	9

5. <i>Vegetable Irritants.</i>	Colchicum	3
	Hellebore	1
	Savin ^e	1
	Cayenne	1
	Castor Seeds.....	1
	Morrison Pills	1
		— 8
6. <i>Animal Irritants.</i>	Cantharides	2
7. <i>Opium.</i>	Opium or Laudanum ...	180
	Opium and Nitric Acid	1
	Poppy Syrup	1
	Godfrey's Cordial.....	6
	Morphia	1
	Acetate of Morphia.....	1
		— 193
8. <i>Hydrocyanic Acid</i>	Med. Hydroc. Acid	27
	Ditto, and Laudanum ...	1
	Ess. Oil of Almonds ...	5
	Bay Leaves	1
		— 34
9. <i>Other Vegetable Narcotics.</i>	Nux Vomica	3
	Strychnia	2
	Belladonna	2
	Hemlock	1
	Monkshood	2
	Spirit	4
	Fungi	4
		— 18
10. <i>Narcot Gases.</i>	Coal Gas	2
11. <i>Unascertained</i>		23
		—
Total in two years		543
		—

“ The total number of deaths from this cause in 1840 are stated to have been 349, of which number there were 181 males, and 168 females. The cases of suicide from Poison, were 161, being 87 females to 74 males. Accident or homicide, 188, being 107 males to 81 females. Of the 75 cases of Poison by Opium, 42 occurred in children under five years of age—a lamentable proof of the extensive mortality among children from the improper administration of this drug. These cases occur among the returned deaths from Opium; but under the head of Medicines improperly administered, three-fourths of the deaths took place among children under five years of age!

Opium	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	75
Arsenic	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	32
Other Poisons, including Medicines improperly administered										242

Total deaths from Poison, in 1840	*349
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	------

The cases of Poisoning by Arsenic and Opium in the above Tables, it is to be feared, are much understated.

Of the 63 cases of Poisoning, treated in the Birmingham General Hospital, from 1848, to June, 1856, *a period of eight years*, the following Table shews the Poison used:—

Opium or Laudanum ...	12
Cyanide of Potassium ...	1
Acitrate of Lead	5
Ammonia	2
Corrosive Sublimate ...	1
Arsenic	3
Oxalic Acid	8
Nitric Acid	4
Sulphuric Acid	9
Strychnia	1
Sulphate of Copper ...	2

* Dr. Taylor, Med. Jur.

Iodine	2
Ess. of Bitter Almonds	1
Nux Vomica	2
Muriate of Morphia	1
Charcoal	1
Other Poisons	8

Total in eight years 63

The number of females was, 42, and males, 21. Deaths, 5.

The following is an analysis of deaths from Poison in England alone, taken from the Registrar General's Reports for six years:—

	MALES.	FEMALES.	TOTAL.
1848,	308	261	569
1849,	290	236	526
1850,	304	249	553
1851,	275	253	528
1852,	253	300	553
1853,	270	219	489
	—	—	—
Total deaths in six years,*	1700	1518	3218
	—	—	—

From 1838 to 1848, the annual number of deaths had increased from 270 to 569, shewing an alarming and rapid increase of 100 *per cent in ten years*; and on comparing the deaths in 1840 with 1850, the deaths had increased from 349 to 553, shewing an excess in 1850 of 204. The average number of deaths for the last 6 years, demonstrates the appalling fact, that 536 persons at the least are annually Poisoned, 10 in every week, or 1 in every 16 hours; irrespective of those who die from the same means, (whose true cause of death is only known to those who possess the dreadful secret of murder,) and are registered with those who die from

* The returns for 1854—5 are not yet published.

"cause unknown," "sudden death" or "by the visitation of God." Cases of poisoning form about 45 per cent of all those in which the law requires evidence from the Medical Practitioner.*

The deaths in the Birmingham General Hospital were, 1 to every 12 cases of Poisoning; and it will not be unreasonable to assume, that the average number of deaths from Poison, in proportion to those who have been the subjects of Poison, will be the same throughout England; viz., 1 in every 12.

According to this computation, 6432 persons of all ages annually either take Poison themselves, or have it administered to them by others, and almost in every instance avowedly for the purposes of self-destruction, or murder by other parties.

The question for solution is—what are the causes? They may be divided into two classes—primary and secondary; the one, which human agency may control or mitigate, but not entirely subdue, are diversified in their character, emanating either from an idea, a desire, or a circumstance, uncontrolled by the higher qualities of man's moral nature; the other arising from the facilities afforded for given effect to such idea, desire, or circumstance. It is secondary causes, then, with which we have to deal. The unrestricted sale of Poisons is one great secondary cause.

In 1831, the number of chymists and druggists in England was 5835, while in 1851 there were 3632 men and 12 women carrying on business under the age of twenty years, and 11,701 men and 298 women of twenty years of age and upwards (exclusive of 15,163 surgeons and apothecaries,) making 15,643 persons, unrestricted, uncontrolled, and irresponsible, with a stock-in-trade sufficient to depopulate the whole continent of Europe.

The present law for restricting the sale of Arsenic was passed in 1851. The average number of deaths annually for three years previous to this enactment was 549, and for the three subsequent years (inclusive of the year 1851) was 523, the deaths being only lessened 26 out of 549. If deaths from poison are to be lessened by an enactment, all those that are available and purchasable should be purchased with difficulty by those persons who require them otherwise than for legitimate purposes.

* Dr. Taylor, Med. Jur.

To restrict the sale of all Poisons, would be inimical to the interests of society, as this would not only include nearly the whole class of medicines, but numerous other substances, of an inert nature, never resorted to for the purposes of crime. Those ought to be restricted, which experience teaches are employed for secret Poisoning. A classification of the Poisons used from 1837 to 1856, taken from the Coroner's returns, and from the books of all the Hospitals, (comprising probably not less than 70,000 cases,) would facilitate the settlement of the *questio vexata*: What are the Poisons the sale of which ought specifically to be restricted?

Every Poison has its antidote, and every evil a remedy, either partial or complete. The interests and safety of the public, demand a severe, but just restriction; and require the appointment of one judicial and administrative head, who will see that the provisions of a restrictive enactment are strictly obeyed, or the pains, penalties, and forfeitures rigidly enforced.

It is submitted, that if the following suggestions were effectually carried out, they would, if not entirely prevent, at least check the growth of this gigantic horror.

THE ANTIDOTE.

1. That the present Act for regulating the sale of Arsenic be repealed.

2. That the sale of certain Poisons, (to be set forth and specified,) be restricted and regulated by another Act, framed upon the following general principles.

3. That a person be appointed to act as Commissioner, to carry the Act into operation, with power to make rules, orders, and regulations, and to appoint such officers as he may deem necessary. Subject to the approval of Her Majesty's Treasury.

4. That no person, shall sell any Poison restricted by the Act, without having first obtained a License to sell.

5. That the Commissioner shall have full power to grant such

number of Licences, in any one town or place as he may think advisable, due regard being had to the number of the inhabitants and their requirements.

6. That persons applying to be Licensed, shall send in an application to the Commissioner, in the form to be prescribed by the Act, accompanied by a certificate signed by the clergyman of the parish in which he shall reside, or by two householders, assessed to the relief of the poor at an estimated rental of not less than £10, or such other sum as may be determined upon, as to the respectability and fitness of the person so applying to be Licensed.

7. That all restricted Poisons be classified, and Licenses granted for the sale thereof, according to such classification, and no person shall sell any of such restricted Poisons not authorized by his License.

8. That on granting Licenses, the vender shall pay a certain fee, according to the class; say £1 10s. for a first class License, 20s. for a second class, and 10s. for a third class, or any less or greater sum that may be determined upon. Such License to be renewed annually.

9. That the vender shall, before the delivery of any restricted Poison to any purchaser, enter in a book, to be kept for that purpose, in the form set forth in the Schedule to the Act, a statement of such sale, with the quantity sold, the nature of the Poison, whether in a solid or liquid state, the purpose for which it is obtained, or stated to be required, the day of the month, and year, the hour of the day, the name, place of abode, and condition, or occupation of the purchaser, and of the witness hereafter referred to, before the delivery to him; such entry to be signed by the vender, purchaser, and witness.

10. That every vender shall cause to be exhibited in some conspicuous place in the shop, or place of business where such Poisons are sold, the words, "Licensed Chymist," "Druggist," or "Apothecary," as the case may be; and shall have furnished to him a compendium of all Poisons, with their effects, symptoms, and antidotes, to enable him to act in any case of emergency, in the absence of a Medical Practitioner.

11. That every vender shall, before delivery of the article sold,

cause to be affixed on the outside of the parcel, or bottle, containing such Poison, in printed letters, clear and legible, the name and description of the contents, and also have the word "Poison" in conspicuous type labelled thereon.

12. That the vender, shall cause all Poisons, authorized to be sold by him, to be kept in a division or compartment of his shop, or place of business, expressly devoted for keeping Poisons, separate and apart from the ordinary articles of trade. And no vender shall permit any restricted Poison to be sold, or made up or compounded into any medicine by any apprentice, assistant, or other person, under the age of twenty years.

13. That the vender shall make and send to the Commissioner, every three months in each year, or oftener if required, a return of all Poisons sold, pursuant to the form contained in the Schedule to the Act, and certified by such vender.

14. That proper books be kept by the Commissioner, in which shall be entered all cases of sale, taken from the quarterly returns, so that a complete Registry of all sales of Poison in the kingdom may be properly made.

15. That the book to be kept by the vender shall be retained by him, until the same shall be filled up by registered sales, and then returned to the Commissioner, who shall cause the vender to be supplied with another book for the like purpose.

16. That any person who shall have in his possession, for the purposes of sale, any Poison, or shall sell the same, not being Licensed and authorized to sell, shall forfeit and pay a sum of money to be fixed upon, by way of penalty.

17. That if any vender shall sell, in any other manner save as authorized by the Act, and the License granted to him for that purpose, or shall deliver the same on sale, without first having entered the same, and signed, and properly labelled, as by the Act required; or if any person purchasing shall give false information; or if any person shall sign his name as a witness to the sale to a person unknown to the person so signing as witness, or subscribe a false entry, such vender or other person, shall forfeit and pay a penalty.

18. That no vender shall sell any restricted Poison to any person whatever, unless the sale be made upon the recommendation, and in the presence of a witness, who shall be a householder, and known to the seller and purchaser. Such witness to sign his name, together with his place of abode, and condition or occupation, to such entries, before the delivery of the articles purchased; and no vender shall sell to any person other than a male person of full age.

19. That any vender who shall wilfully alter any entry, suppress, conceal, or destroy, or refuse to produce any book, writing, or other document, which may be required by the Commissioner or any person authorized to demand the same, shall forfeit his License and pay a penalty.

20. That any person not being a wholesale dealer, or Licensed vender, who shall purchase, or have in his possession, any restricted Poison, (the nature and quantities thereof to be specified,) shall cause the same to be deposited in some safe and secure place in his dwelling-house, shop, or premises, free from access by other persons, (except when the same shall be in actual use for legitimate purposes;) and if any person shall die from the effects of Poison, and such death shall arise through the neglect of the person being the owner, or the person who shall have the possession or custody thereof, by reason of not having the same safely deposited, such person shall forfeit and pay a penalty for such neglect.

21. That no vender shall sell Arsenic, unless before the sale, the same be mixed with soot or indigo, in the proportions to be determined upon; and when the person purchasing shall state, that the purpose for which it is obtained is other than for agriculture purposes, such Arsenic may be sold without admixture, of not less than a certain quantity to be specified.

22. That the Act shall not extend to the sale of any Poison, when the same forms part of the ingredients of any medicine, required to be made up or compounded according to the prescriptions of a legally qualified Practitioner, or a member of the Medical profession; but no member of the Medical profession shall sell any restricted Poison, except as before mentioned, without being Licensed.

23. That the Act shall not extend to the sale of Poisons by wholesale to retail dealers, upon orders in writing in the ordinary course of wholesale dealing, but every manufacturer and wholesale dealer of certain restricted Poisons, (to be specified,) shall once in every year, make a return of all sales by him, with such other information as the Commisioner shall require.

24. That the Commissioner shall make an annual report, and the Act contain the usual clauses for giving effect to its operation.

The advantages to be derived from such an enactment, if properly administered, would be as follows :—

1. A suppression of indiscriminate Poison selling as it now exists, and a restriction of the facilities for the commission of crime.

2. The number of dealers would be diminished; none but respectable parties would sell. Great caution would be exercised by the seller, and in most cases the principal (and not the assistant or apprentice) would take the responsibility of sale; parties who required the article for legitimate purposes, would have no difficulty in procuring it from a vender to whom they were known, while the poisoner would have difficulty and trouble, and would pause ere he committed the first act in the crime of murder. Sales would be less frequent; fewer cases of poisoning would occur; human life be less endangered; and society made more secure.

3. The facilities for discovering the person guilty of administering Poison would be great. No person could then purchase Poison (no matter how potent and mysterious its agency) but the name of the purchaser and all other particulars would be in possession of the authorities, by means of the quarterly, and other returns, thereby making detection almost immediate and certain.

4. The evidence of purchase would be conclusive, by production of a vender's register-book with the purchaser's and witness's signatures. On criminal trials, witnesses would be relieved from the painful and often embarrassing position, of giving important evidence of the sale to a purchaser, unsupported by any corroborative testimony.

5. Deaths from accidental poisoning, arising from mistakes on sale, would seldom occur, and the vender would not be liable to dispense a Poison instead of an aperient.

6. Assuming two-thirds of the present number of chymists to obtain Licenses, the amount realized would not be far short of £10,000—an amount probably sufficient to cover the working expenses of the Act, inasmuch as the officers of the Inland Revenue department might be employed in giving effect to its operation.

7. A public good would be realized by simple means. The consumer would pay the cost, as the seller would increase the price of the article sold, on account of having to pay for his License.

Why should John Jones, the grocer, be compelled to pay for an annual License to sell tea by retail, or Widow Smith to vend tobacco, while David Bolus, who lives on the opposite side of the street, with his sign emblazoned with mortar and pestle, and “has no connection with any other house,” sells Poison to all comers, and is exempt? If it is right that a License should be granted to the one to vend a luxury, it cannot be wrong to License the other to sell a Poison.*

The dark shades of the past, unerringly indicate the events of the pregnant future. Ere another year shall revolve upon the axis of time, thousands of unsuspecting persons will feel the grim grip of death, and out of those, hundreds who are now “dreaming of

* In the III. Henry 8, (1511,) was passed, an Act concerning Phesicians and Surgeons, which set forth, “That the science and cunning of Phisick (to the perfect knowledge whereof, be requisite, both great learning, and ripe experience,) was exercised, by a great multitude of ignorant persons, of whom the greater part have no manner of insight in the same, nor in any other kind of learning; some also can know no letters on the book: that common artificers, smiths, weavers, and women, boldly and accustomedly take upon them great cures, and things of great difficulty, who partly use sorcery, apply such medicines as be very noious, to the high displeasure of God, greivous hurt, damage, and destruction of many of the king’s liege people, most especially them that cannot discern the uncunning from the cunning;” and enacted that no person was to act as “Phesicon,” or Surgeon, in London or the Suburbs, until he was *licensed* by the Bishop of London, or the Dean of St. Paul’s.

a long life of pleasure here," will meet with a miserable and untimely end; adding to the number already immolated at the shrine of England's modern moloch.

"Shall these things be, and pass us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?"

Religion and humanity forbid it; and the voice that spake when crime was young, from the sacred shadows of Sinai's hallowed mount, amid "the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking," still reverberates through the moral universe of man, that holy and eternal law, "Thou shalt not kill."

Who are the parties responsible for these "wants and fears," and deaths? Parliament or the people? Both!

*Barker Street, Handsworth,
Birmingham.*

THE END.

17

a long life of pleasure here," will meet with a miserable and
untimely end; adding to the misery already inflicted by the
shrine of England's modern idol.

"Still there lives in and out of the summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?"

Religion and humanity forbid it; and the voice that spoke when
there was young, from the sacred shadows of St. Paul's hallowed
mosaic, "the Church," and the lightning, and the voice of
the trumpet, and the agonising sweat, "still reverberates through
the moral universe of man, that holy and eternal law, 'Thou shalt
not kill.'"

Who are the parties responsible for these "wants and fears,"
and deaths? Parliament or the people? Both!

Under Great St. Martin's,
Birmingham.