

A century of concern about complementary medicines

John S Dowden, Editor, Australian Prescriber

In August 1907 the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia received the report of the Royal Commission on Secret Drugs, Cures and Foods.¹ This revealed the widespread promotion and purchase of dangerous and useless medicines. Then, as now, there was political concern about Australia's population growth and the report contended that nostrums had brought about a decline in fertility and increased infant mortality.

The declining birth rate of the recently federated country was of particular concern to Octavius Beale, a piano manufacturer from Sydney. He therefore persuaded Prime Minister Alfred Deakin to establish the Royal Commission. The Prime Minister agreed as long as his government did not have to pay anything. Beale therefore funded the inquiry himself. This included travel to Britain, Germany, Canada and the USA.

The 431 page report seems very moralistic, portraying the manufacturers of medicines as 'gilded miscreants' engaged in the 'multifarious evils of the traffic in secret drugs'. These medicines were 'not subject to preliminary examination, license and inspection', so Beale proposed legislation for the compulsory registration of products. He may therefore have

begun a process which ultimately led to the foundation of the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

Beale found that newspapers and magazines were publishing stories which were really promotional pieces, in addition to accepting advertising for unproven medicines. Even then the marketing was sophisticated with companies buying and selling the names of pharmacists' customers. Beale therefore proposed a ban on pharmaceutical advertising.

In 1907 little information was disclosed about medicines, particularly their active ingredients. Beale said, 'The preservation of secrecy... is absolutely indispensable to the traders whose traffic is reported upon...'. One hundred years later, 'commercial-in-confidence' is still a barrier to our understanding of complementary medicines.²

Acknowledgement: former Editor of Australian Prescriber, Dr John McEwen, for unearthing the report.

References

1. Report by Royal Commission on Secret Drugs, Cures and Foods. Beale OC. Parliament, Australia. Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia; 1907.
2. Dowden JS. Injunction impedes independent information. *Aust Prescr* 2006;29:120.

Book review

Therapeutic Guidelines: Neurology. Version 3. Melbourne: Therapeutic Guidelines Limited; 2007. 273 pages. Price \$39, students \$30, plus postage

John Casey, Resident Medical Officer, Royal Brisbane Hospital, Brisbane, and Pharmacist

The third edition of Therapeutic Guidelines: Neurology is a timely update to an essential reference for Australian prescribers. This edition is well organised and presents concentrated information that is suitable for readers of all levels – from medical students to specialists.

This edition covers essential subject areas of neurology such as headache, stroke, epilepsy and Parkinson's disease. As a doctor-in-training, I found the headache section useful with concise differential diagnoses and red-flag warnings. The stroke chapter is compact and contains the latest evidence and best practice recommendations. Management of epilepsy and

Parkinson's disease can be challenging and, appropriately, these chapters have been expanded to assist practitioners with patients who have treatment-resistant disease or complications.

The redesigned chapter on getting to know your drugs contains detailed practical information that also covers off-label uses. Newly released drugs, such as levetiracetam and pregabalin, have been included and each entry provides an excellent overview for busy practitioners. For pharmacists and specialists, it is sufficiently detailed to include pharmacokinetics and extensive listings of drug interactions and adverse reactions.

While this revision is well written, some sections are overly detailed and wordy which detracts from this book being a quick reference guide. A practical inclusion for future editions would be a tabulated version of driving recommendations for people with epilepsy, rather than a website reference.

I recommend this addition to the Therapeutic Guidelines library. It is a great reference for common neurological conditions and is sure to help most prescribers in their daily practice.