

## Pharmacopoeia Londinensis reuisa Royal College of Physicians, 1632

This is the elaborate frontispiece of the second edition of *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, a list of all known drugs and recipe book for the preparation of medicines, first published by the Royal College of Physicians in 1618.

It shows the hand of God (YHWH in Hebrew letters) holding the Royal seal and, underneath the title, the College coat of arms. These are flanked by four famous physicians: Hippocrates, Galen, Mesue (Yuhanna ibn Masawaih), and Avicenna (Ibn Sina). The book is written in Latin and contains a system for weights and measures, a catalogue of ingredients, a guide to common Latin names of plants, and a large number of medical recipes.

You can view the 1632 second edition online at the Internet Archive: [Pharmacopoeia Londinensis](#).

### Apothecaries vs. Physicians

Physicians were doctors who had formal medical training and charged high fees. Apothecaries did not have medical degrees and were not supposed to prescribe medicines themselves or treat patients, but many did offer affordable health advice to ordinary people. For most of the sixteenth century the Royal College of Physicians had controlled apothecaries, having the power to fine or prosecute them for prescribing medicines themselves, inspect their premises, and destroy any drugs seen as unsuitable.

The Royal College of Physicians lost some of these powers in 1617 when the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries was created. This increased the status of apothecaries because they could now dispense treatments that had not been prescribed by a Royal College physician.

This *Pharmacopoeia*, backed by a royal proclamation from King James I, helped the physicians regain some control: no one could legally sell a drug that did not appear in this book, and every apothecary in England had to buy a copy and follow its instructions. The *Pharmacopoeia* received nine editions in its first century, and was controversially translated into English (with additions) in 1649 by Nicholas Culpeper. It remained the definitive guide until it was replaced by the *British Pharmacopoeia* in 1864, which is updated each year and currently used in over 100 countries.



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### Questions

1. **How does the frontispiece convey a sense of the book's authority? What was the significance of the four figures depicted?**
2. The *Pharmacopoeia* is written in Latin and contains only recipes for medicines. The apothecary Nicholas Culpeper translated it into English and added the uses of each medicine. **Why did the College of Physicians protest against Culpeper's publication?**
3. **Why was it important to regulate medicines in the seventeenth century? Is it equally important for modern medicine?**

### FURTHER READING

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**Iatrochemistry: Chemical Medicine**

The *Pharmacopoeia* included 'Medicamenta Antiqua et Nova' (old and new medicines): a mix of herbal and animal remedies derived from the teachings of Galen, and newer treatments based on chemical ingredients favoured by iatrochemists.

The difference is illustrated by these two examples:

**Burning of swallows:** Cut the throats of swallow chicks so that the blood flows over the wings. Sprinkle them with a little salt, and burn them in a new glazed earthenware vessel which has been blocked up. Keep the ashes for use. Hedgehogs (or sea-urchins), toads and frogs are burned in the same way, but without the salt.

**For Turbith mineral, the recipe is:** Take equal parts very pure crude mercury and oil of vitriol filtered of all phlegm: let it be put in a vessel which was first placed on warm ashes; then slowly increase the heat gradually until all the oil of vitriol has evaporated, leaving a white mass in the bottom of the vessel. Separate this from the crude mercury, and place in distilled water, or rainwater. It will immediately turn yellow; wash it many times in warm water to make it sweet, and after even in cardiac water, then let it dry.

With each new edition of the *Pharmacopoeia*, many of older remedies, such as goat's urine and moss taken from a human skull, were replaced by newer, chemically derived, drugs.