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From Poison Peddlers to Civic Worthies: The Reputation of the Apothecaries in Georgian England

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Social History of Medicine, Volume 22, Issue 1, 1 April 2009, Pages 1–21,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkn096>

Published: 03 February 2009

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Abstract

Trust is not automatically granted to providers of professional services. The doctors of Georgian England were, by later standards, deficient in medical knowhow, particularly before the mid-nineteenth-century scientific understanding of antiseptics, and much satirised. Nonetheless, the emergence of a coherent medical profession indicates that the picture was far more intricate and positive than the satirists implied. Patients sought care as well as cure; and medical practitioners had no problems in finding custom. This essay reassesses the apothecaries' role in the slow transition whereby reputable practitioners differentiated themselves from 'quacks'. The change was propelled by three linked processes: firstly, the intersection of expanding medical supply with insistent consumer demand, noting that demand plays a key role alongside supply; secondly, the intersection of local power-broking within Britain's growing towns with an ethos of community service, whereby apothecaries joined the ranks of 'civic worthies' and trusted care-givers; and, lastly, the intersection of shared medical knowledge among practitioners at all levels with the creation of a distinctive professional identity. As public trust grew, so Parliament was emboldened in 1815 to license the Apothecaries Society as the regulatory body for the medical rank-and-file, so launching the distinctive Anglo-American system of arm's-length state regulation.

Keywords: [apothecaries](#), [Georgian](#), [towns](#), [philanthropy](#), [professionalization](#), [professions](#)

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Online ISSN 1477-4666

Print ISSN 0951-631X

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