



Royal
Pharmaceutical
Society
of Great Britain

MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN
1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN

INFORMATION SHEET: 13

PHARMACEUTICAL SYMBOLS

WORLD-WIDE THERE ARE MANY SYMBOLS, SIGNS AND BADGES USED TO REPRESENT PHARMACY.

A number of these symbols enjoy particularly widespread usage, and are explained and illustrated below. There is no standard representation of them, but the illustrations on this sheet have been chosen to give the simplest and clearest image available for each one.

MAJOR PHARMACEUTICAL AND MEDICAL SYMBOLS

1. The one snake on a staff symbol is called the **serpent of Epidaurus on the staff of Aesculapius**, and can be seen in the bottom left quarter of the shield on the crest of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. Aesculapius was one of the Greek Gods of medicine, and is usually depicted carrying a staff with a snake coiled around it. The snake was a symbol of wisdom, immortality and healing in Middle and far Eastern cultures far older than that of ancient Greece, although its association with Aesculapius has been attributed to snakes used at a temple dedicated to him in Epidaurus in the north eastern Peloponnese. This symbol is often considered particularly suitable for pharmacy.

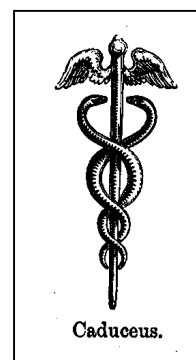


2. The bowl with a snake coiled around it is called the **bowl of Hygeia with the serpent of Epidaurus**, and is a variant on the above. Hygeia was Aesculapius's daughter and a Greek Goddess of health. Her symbol was a serpent drinking from a bowl. The vessel is usually depicted with a long stem and a shallow, wide bowl as seen here. It also is considered suitable for pharmacy. The bowl of Hygeia with serpent of Epidaurus shown here is the symbol for Hungarian pharmacists.



Hungary
Fig 19: Hungarian pharmacists' emblem

3. The symbol of two snakes on a staff is called the **Caduceus**. The staff, depicted with wings, is that of Mercury (Roman) or Hermes (Greek), messenger of the Gods and also God of commerce. (The Greek root of the word Caduceus means "herald's wand"). The history and meaning of this symbol is complicated. In the West it has been adopted as a symbol of medicine since the 19th century, probably because of its similarity to the serpent of Epidaurus on the staff of Aesculapius. It is generally considered less suitable for pharmacy than the one snake motif, but is more popular for use as a general medical symbol. The Caduceus shown here is from the 1888 *Chambers Encyclopaedia*



Caduceus.

4. The **serpent around a palm tree** symbol is used by French and Portuguese pharmaceutical bodies, and was introduced in the 19th century. The snake is associated with healing, as discussed above, but here has a more specific meaning. The palm tree represents the vegetable kingdom, the serpent the animal kingdom, and the rocks at the palm tree's base the mineral kingdom. The serpent and palm tree shown here is the design used by the Portuguese Order of Pharmacists.

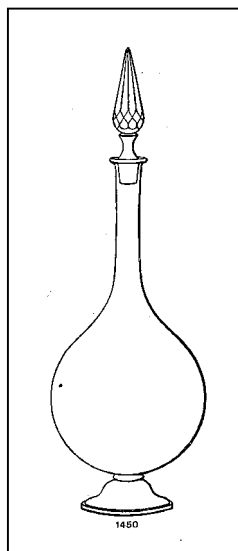


5. The **Green Cross** was first introduced in the as a pharmaceutical symbol in continental Europe in the early 20th century as a replacement for the Red Cross. The Red Cross, previously used by some medical institutions and by continental pharmacists, was adopted by the International Red Cross in 1863, necessitating the need for an alternative. The Green Cross was not used in Britain until 1984, when it was adopted by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society



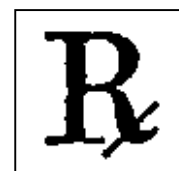
of Great Britain as a standard symbol for British pharmacy. The Society stipulated that it should be produced in a specified shade of green, or in black and white, and that the words pharmacy or pharmacist, or the Society's name, should appear with it.

6. The **mortar and pestle** has long been used as a pharmaceutical symbol in Britain and on the European mainland, and is still widely employed as a pharmacy shop sign in Scotland. The mortar and pestle are tools of traditional pharmacy, hence their use as an easily recognisable visual motif. The mortar and pestle symbol shown here is a stylised Scandinavian version.



7. The **carboy**, a glass vessel with a globular base tapering to a narrow neck, was commonly displayed filled with brightly coloured liquids in pharmacy shop windows well into the second half of this century, and has come to be a symbol of pharmacy. The term carboy is a corruption of the Persian word qarabah or qarrabah, meaning "large flagon", and the carboy is thought to originate from the Near East, where drug sellers used large glass vessels, filled with coloured liquids, especially rosewater and wine, in their stalls. There is some debate over exactly when glass carboys were introduced in Britain, but it is thought to have been sometime in the late 17th or early 18th century. Early examples were usually dark hued glass. By the late 18th century they were recorded by observers as a characteristic and attractive feature of the chemists and druggists shop window, and have retained a strong association with pharmacy ever since. The carboy illustrated here is a "swan neck" type from *Maw Son & Sons Catalogue* of 1903.

8. The **recipe** sign appears at the start of prescriptions. Although universally accepted as an abbreviation of "recipe" (Latin for 'take thou'), it has also been suggested that it is the astronomical sign of the planet Jupiter.



This information sheet is also available in a large font size. Please contact us on 020 7572 2210 or email museum@rpsgb.org.