Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound (1873-1906) [1]

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First marketed in the US 1875, Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was an herbal medicine used by women to relieve menstrual discomfort and menopausal symptoms in women. The herbal compound was invented by Lydia Estes Pinkham in 1873 in her home kitchen in Lynn, Massachusetts. Pinkham created the compound by mixing alcohol with roots and herbs. The compound was patented, packaged, and distributed by the Mrs. Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company in 1876. The Mrs. Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company advertised the compound in many US newspapers and magazines, causing Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound to become a household name and making treatments for female reproductive discomfort mainstream in the US.

In 1873, during a US economic downturn, fifty-four year old Lydia Pinkham was concocting home remedies for illnesses using family recipes. According to Pinkham scholar Sarah Stage, the tradition of concocting medicines in the home was a common hobby for housewives during the nineteenth-century, when many people were suspicious of the expensive and often dangerous medications prescribed by doctors. Pinkham owned botanical remedy books and medical guides, including the herbal remedy guide, John King's *The American Dispensatory*. Pinkham provided herbal remedies to her neighbors and friends for various ailments. As her remedies became more popular, strangers contacted her in search of her recipe. With help from her three sons, she started packaging and selling the compound as Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound for the treatment of menstrual discomfort.

Pinkham created her vegetable compound using a mixture of roots and herbs that grew wildly in North America. The original recipe, created by Pinkham on her home kitchen stove, contained black cohosh, life root, unicorn root, pleurisy root, and fenugreek seed. The unicorn root allegedly gave energy to the uterus [4] and lessened the likelihood of miscarriage [5]. The pleurisy root allegedly helped cure prolapsed uteri, which occur when uterine tissues drop into the vaginal canal. Black cohosh allegedly treated symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes, and to have sedative and anti-inflammatory properties that treated menstrual cramping. Pinkham purchased her ingredients from local suppliers, and after steeping and macerating the plants, combined them in cloth bags and allowed the mixture to percolate. She added alcohol to her compound to preserve the mixture, filtering it through an additional cloth before bottling the compound for sale.

Pinkham's original recipe contained approximately twenty percent alcohol, which Pinkham claimed was a preservative for the vegetable mixture. According to Stage, the Pinkham family considered alcohol to be a legitimate medicinal ingredient. The family, however, made lozenges and pills for instances in which the consumption of alcohol might worsen menstrual disorders. Critics questioned the medical utility of the compound's alcohol content, arguing that the intoxicating effects of alcohol overwhelmed any supposed medical benefits. In response, the Pinkhams claimed that their vegetable compound posed no threat to those wishing to abstain from consuming alcohol.

In 1876, with the help of her sons, Pinkham established Mrs. Lydia Pinkham's Medicine Company to mass produce the compound and transformed her home basement in Lynn, Massachusetts, into a factory. That same year, in 1876, Pinkham patented her vegetable compound. Pinkham and her sons began packaging bottles of her vegetable compound for sale, and they advertised the product by distributing pamphlets around the neighborhood. Throughout the 1870s, Mrs. Lydia Pinkham's Medicine Company expanded its advertising throughout New England, placing advertisements in newspapers and women's magazines.

The vegetable compound's advertisements and packaging featured Pinkham's portrait. According to historian James Young, the prominent placement of Pinkham's portrait on her products was an attempt to appeal to women. The compassionate and grandmotherly image of Pinkham was meant to assure women that the vegetable compound had been created by a woman who understood the discomfort of menstruation [6] and menopause. Young claims that advertisements for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound made Pinkham the most recognizable woman in late nineteenth century US.

The compound claimed to treat a variety of what Pinkham called female complaints, a term commonly used to refer to women's reproductive ailments in the nineteenth-century. Primarily, the compound was advertised as a treatment for menstrual cramps and menopause symptoms, such as hot flashes. After the product began selling more successfully, the Pinkham family adjusted the packaging and advertisements for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound to claim that the compound assisted conception [7] by lowering risk of miscarriage [5], and that it treated kidney and ovarian diseases. Pinkham's product eventually became so well known and her face so well recognized, that songs were created surrounding her name and legacy. One such song describes Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound as causing weight gain, increasing milk production during lactation, and increasing female fertility. According to Stage, consumer testimonials for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound frequently featured the saying, "There is a baby in every bottle," which became the compound's tagline.

Many ads and in-package pamphlets asked readers to submit inquiries about female health for Pinkham to address in published pamphlets. Pinkham started a Department of Advice and guaranteed women that no male would ever read the contents of the letters addressed to Mrs. Lydia Pinkham, encouraging women to ask questions they may otherwise have deemed uncomfortable or taboo. According to Young, Pinkham used candid and straightforward language on her packaging and advice pamphlets to target women who were displeased with the care they had received from their physicians and to inform her female audience about their bodies and reproductive processes.

According to Young, Pinkham's Vegetable Compound helped give more power to women by taking some medical authority away from the male dominated medical field. During the 1870s, while Pinkham was distributing her products and publishing medical advice, the standard treatment for severe menstrual cramps involved surgically removing the ovaries, a medical procedure with a forty percent mortality rate. According to Young, Pinkham said that male physicians were indifferent and insensitive to women's reproductive health. Young claims Pinkham argued that only women could understand a woman's ills. Pinkham's products challenged the treatments male physicians prescribed to women in late nineteenth century.

In 1906, the US Government enacted the Pure Food and Drug Act, which required producers of patent medicines, like Mrs. Lydia Pinkham's Medicine Company, to disclose the ingredients in their products on the product's label. Once the alcohol content of Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was displayed on its label, customers discovered that the product contained fifteen percent alcohol. Mrs. Lydia Pinkham's Medicine Company had recently decreased the alcohol content from twenty percent alcohol. The new Act also prevented producers of patent medicines from making claims on their packaging and advertisements about the product's effectiveness that were not necessarily true. That meant that Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound could no longer be advertised as treating problems like prolapsed uterus [4], uterine ulcers, or general female weaknesses. Nonetheless, the compound continued receive positive testimonials and sell successfully.

In 1968, Mrs. Lydia Pinkham's Medicine Company was sold to Cooper Laboratories headquartered in Pleasanton, California. Into the first decades of the twenty-first century, pills and liquids based off Pinkham's original vegetable compound recipe were available in pharmacies and do not contain alcohol.

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