

DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Conducted by Paul C. Olsen.*

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SHALL THE LAW RESTRICT THE SALE OF MEDICINES?

BY PAUL C. OLSEN.

The obvious answer to the question which is the title of this article is in the affirmative. But once having approved the idea in principle its execution becomes a complex problem which is particularly difficult to understand by a person who is not familiar with the peculiar inter-relationships of the business and professional problems of pharmacy.

One well-known reaction to suggestions that the sale of medicines should be restricted to registered pharmacists is this. "If there is one class of retailers which has branched out into unrelated lines of business," says the objector, "those retailers are the retail druggists."

While it is true that some retail druggists, with a possible selfish motive, would like to have the sale of all medicines restricted to drug stores now, they probably realize that, under present-day conditions, little legal assistance can be expected for reasons stated above.

The only possible justification for the legal restriction of the sale of medicines to drug stores is the necessity of protecting public health.

In support of this contention instances are cited repeatedly of dangerous drugs and chemicals being dispensed by people who have no training in pharmacy and, consequently, no knowledge of the character and use of these goods.

Of course, personally, I am heartily in sympathy with any movement to put and keep the sales of dangerous medicines, drugs and chemicals in the hands of people who know what they are selling and what purposes are served by the preparations they sell.

I am pointing out here merely that any complaint about other stores taking business away from drug stores will receive little consideration by legislatures unless it is made plainly evident to these legislatures at the same time that the protection of the health and, indeed, the very lives of people depends upon such restrictions.

It is incumbent upon those sincerely interested in the progress of pharmacy, as a result of this situation, to limit their appeals for privileges and rights to those items on which the dangers of indiscriminate sales can be made plainly evident to lay legislators. To say, for instance, that the sale of castor oil should be restricted to drug stores is not going to win a very sympathetic ear unless, at the

* Lecturer on Business, Columbia University and Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science.

same time, strong clinical evidence is presented in a forceful way to show untoward results from the indiscriminate sale of castor oil.

Another aspect of the problem of securing, to protect public health, legal restrictions upon the sale of dangerous medicines, drugs and chemicals is the following. Granting the need for this protection, will people get such protection if the sales of these goods are confined to registered pharmacists?

With due respect to the thousands of ably and expertly conducted pharmacies throughout the United States, I am sure that to-day there is not in every drug store complete assurance of such protection. Furthermore, I feel sure that the proprietors of these ably and expertly conducted pharmacies would be the first to agree that there are drug stores in this country which cannot be trusted to render the professional services of pharmacy in a dependable way. They are deeply concerned about this condition, and rightly so, for the same reason that responsible physicians are exercised about the activities of their malpracticing brethren.

There are deficiencies, which it is regrettable to say are not very difficult to find, resulting from a number of causes. One is the sale of dangerous medicines, drugs and chemicals by unqualified persons without the supervision of registered pharmacists.

Another cause is the sale of drugs therapeutically useless. This may be the result of carelessness or laziness or the result, in some instances, of efforts to sell merchandise which is worthless but which the owner prefers to sell rather than throw it out and take a loss upon it.

Another way in which some fail to render to their customers the proper professional service and protection is inexpert dispensing and compounding. This may result from a lack of knowledge, a lack of skill or carelessness. Persons not familiar with the practice of pharmacy, frequently criticize the requirement that a person must complete a three- or four-year course in pharmacy and have some years of practical experience in addition before he can become a registered pharmacist. Also some students of pharmacy resent the time and expense of obtaining training in a profession which they believe they will have little opportunity to practice in their stores. It will be admitted, I believe, that there still are pharmacists who are unable to perform competently the professional demands which are made upon them. As a result, some physicians will for all or some of their prescriptions direct patients to certain pharmacies, where they feel assured, these prescriptions will have the attention or supervision of qualified pharmacists. Similarly, some people, although they are increasingly price conscious of the more popular packaged, identified merchandise, travel long distances out of their way to make sick-room and emergency purchases at drug stores at which they are assured of competent professional service.

I am firmly of the belief that for the protection of public health the sales of many thousands of commonly used medicines, drugs and chemicals should be restricted to registered pharmacists. But I am likewise firmly of the belief that efforts to secure legal protection for this ideal will be seriously handicapped until there is more general assurance that all persons licensed to practice pharmacy are willing and able to render the professional service and protection which rightfully should be entrusted exclusively to pharmacists.
