Current Comment

"Patent Medicine" Secrecy—A Tardy Admission

For years the medical profession has insisted that the real reason that nostrum makers keep the composition of their products secret is (1) for the glamour that such secrecy throws around them and (2) the fact that so long as the public does not know what is in a preparation the advertiser's imagination is given freer play. The unknown is always awe-inspiring. The "patent medicine" makers, on the other hand, have stoutly maintained that their reason for keeping the composition of their product secret is that the formula is personal property and, if it were made known, the market would be flooded with imitations, and their property destroyed. Now comes the mouthpiece of the "patent medicine" people, Standard Remedies, with the tardy admission that the medical profession is right and their own constituents wrong. Says this publication in an editorial "Formulae and Secrecy":

"It should be remembered that while a developed formula has a great value, it is the trade name, the advertising, the merchandising skill applied in connection with it that creates its valuable good will. [Italics ours.—Ed.] Ten to one a thorough search through books of formulae will reveal that your own is already known to the medical world. But no one can get the same benefit from it that you have gained unless they spend in merchandising it the same money you have spent."

Elsewhere in the same editorial Standard Remedies admits that "the ingredients of some of the biggest selling proprietary medicines are duplicated in one way or another by imitators. Usually without profit." In other words, as The Journal has iterated and reiterated, the composition of the average "patent medicine" is usually the least commercially valuable thing about it. The real thing of commercial value is the name, which the manufacturer protects by a perpetual monopoly granted under the trade-mark law. Pink dish-water could be put on the market under some fancy name (trade-marked) and by persistent and insistent advertising built up into a large property. If it were nothing but pink dish-water, only advertising, of course, could keep it alive. Add a stiff dash of spiritus frumenti, or some equally intriguing drug, to the mixture and the composition alone might keep it moving after momentum had been given it by advertising. The claim long made by "patent medicine" makers that they had to keep the composition of their nostrums secret in order to protect themselves is buncombe because every "patent medicine" maker knows what Standard Remedies admits, that his preparation can be analyzed by any good chemist and duplicated. Now that the "patent medicine" people themselves acknowledge that the real commercial value of their products lies in the "development" that has been brought about by advertising, there is no longer any reason for our timid lawgivers shying at every "open formula" bill that may be introduced for the purpose of giving the drug-taking public a modicum, at least, of protection.

Again "Proprietary Medicines and the Doctor"

Twice recently we have called attention to the way in which the mails of physicians, and both medical and lay editors have been flooded with reprints of a paper by one Irwin G. Jennings, who was giving "Vital Reasons Why the Medical Profession and the Medicine Man Should Pool Their Ideals and Work Together to Benefit Humanity." The paper in question appeared originally in the official organ of the Glass Container Association which, of course, is interested in the bottle business. The author of the paper was described as a "judge" and a "lawyer," although the fact was not brought out that he was the editor of The Glass Container. In The Journal's previous comments, it was pointed out that, while the Glass Container Association has its headquarters in New York City, and the envelopes in which this reprint was sent out bore the New York address, the postmark showed that the mailing was done in Chicago to various parts of the United States. The envelopes did not bear a stamp, but bore the post office imprint reading; "U. S. Postage Paid 1 Cent, Permit 2492." The Journal is advised that " Permit 2492" is held by the Standard Remedies Publishing Company of Chicago! Standard Remedies, as mentioned elsewhere in these pages, is the mouthpiece of the "patent medicine" interests. "We are advertised by our loving friends."