



**ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM
66-68 East Smithfield, London E1W 1AW**

INFORMATION SHEET: 20

TAKING THE MEDICINE

DOCTORS PRESCRIBE A LIQUID MEDICINE AND INFORM THE PATIENT HOW TO TAKE IT. HOW CAN THE PATIENT TAKE THE CORRECT DOSE?

HISTORY

The earliest liquid medicines would have consisted of an amount of herb, which early man would have soaked in water and drunk. Centuries later, active ingredients of herbs were extracted, minerals powdered or dissolved and dosages assessed. These doses would be prescribed by weight or measure. Some measures would be quite vague, for example “as much powder as will cover a farthing”, others would be related to household items such as spoons and drinking glasses. Liquid medicine doses did not appear until the late 19th century when the medicine would be labelled, for example, as “a sixth part to be taken three times a day”. With the advent of moulded glassware in the late 19th century, bottles could be graduated.

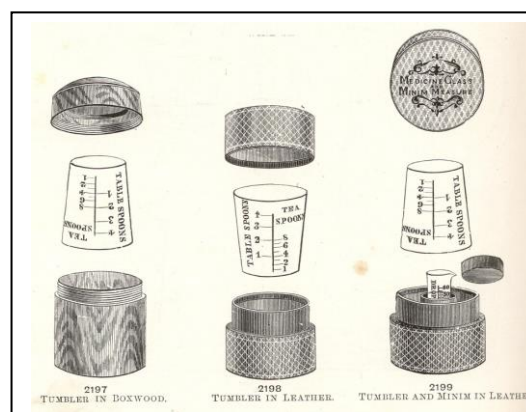
DOMESTIC MEASURES

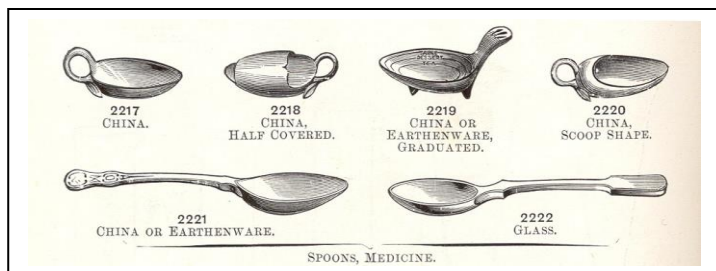
Until the instigation of metric weights and measures in 1971, medicinal dosages, were:

- A teaspoon = one fluid drachm
- A dessertspoon = two fluid drachms
- A tablespoon = half a fluid ounce
- A wineglassful = two fluid ounces
- A teacupful = three fluid ounces

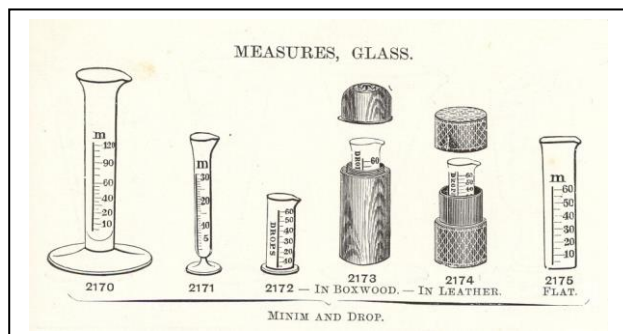
Following metrication, the dose of a medicine was calculated in 5ml doses and a British Standard for 5ml spoons was decreed.

Unfortunately, the actual capacity of domestic spoons, wineglasses and teacups varied considerably. In order to make dosing more accurate, domestic measures were manufactured which were graduated to the above measures. Some were ‘spoon-shaped’, graduated on the





inside. Others domestic measures were glass with etched or painted graduations or ceramic tumblers graduated on the inside. Many domestic measures included minims which were accurately measured 'drops'. Thus, if 20 drops were ordered as a dose, it would be more accurate to use a minim measure than to just let drops fall from the neck of the container.



Specialised spoons and measures were also developed for administering medicine. In 1828 a Mr Gibson invented the *Gibson Spoon* for giving a dose of Castor Oil (a strong laxative). It was originally advertised for administering medicine to "lunatics and fractious children". The oil was placed in the spoon, the cover closed, the spoon thrust into the patient's mouth with the thumb covering the end, then the thumb withdrawn to allow air pressure to force the oil to flow into the patient's throat. Many examples of the Gibson Spoon bear evidence of teeth marks.

An example of a specialised measure was the Seidlitz Measure which was manufactured to have two "cups" joined at their bases. A Seidlitz Powder, an indigestion remedy, actually consisted of two powders which were mixed in water before taking. The measure, made from wood, metal or ceramic, measured each powder accurately.



As previously stated, modern dosage is in millilitres (ml). In addition to the plastic 5ml spoon there are plastic syringes to aid administration of less than 5ml to children and graduated medicine glasses for larger amounts.

See also Information Sheet 11, *Weights and Measures*, and Information Sheet 19, *Prescription Reading*.

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The large illustration overleaf shows a selection of domestic medicine measures from *S Maw, Son and Thompson's 1882 catalogue*. Other illustrations are from *S Maw, Son and Sons' 1903 catalogue* and the *Museum collection*.

This information sheet is also available in a large font size.

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