

Pictures of Health: Gendered Medical Advertising in *the Daily Colonist* from 1867 to 1917

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Canadian perceptions of gender radically shifted between the formation of the Dominion in 1867 and the end of the First World War in 1918. While Victorian gender ideals grew increasingly unstable as new roles for men and women appeared, such as the suffragette, the new woman, and the shell-shocked soldier, Canadians grew anxious over the gendered health of men and women. Alongside these social developments, this period also saw the mass-proliferation of advertisements in Canadian newspapers, many of which exploited contemporary concerns over men's and women's physical and mental health to sell their products. In the following essay, I will examine health advertisements in eight issues of the Daily Colonist (Victoria's most popular newspaper in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) published between 1867 and 1917, paying particular attention to three types of health ads: ads for patent medicine, ads for medical practitioners, and non-medical ads for health-preserving products. I argue that these gendered medical advertisements are uniquely positioned to help us understand late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gender dynamics precisely due to their role in both responding to and shaping gender ideals.

On the twentieth of February 1900, a mock column appeared in the *Daily Colonist* (the precursor to the modern *Times Colonist*) that ironically draws attention to the numerous medical advertisements alongside which it was published: "Very Annoying.—One of the most vexatious things in modern times is to read as it were a story in our daily papers and then find at the end of the same a patent medicine ad."¹ Indeed, in that same issue of the *Daily Colonist*, there are eleven medical advertisements spaced throughout only eight pages.² Gendered in their language, many advertisements published in the *Daily Colonist* exploited contemporary anxieties over men's and women's physical and mental health. This exploitation of health concerns is most evident in

¹ "Very Annoying," *Daily British Colonist*, 20 February 1900, 5. Because the *Daily Colonist* went by several names during the period of 1867 to 1917, I will refer to it exclusively as "the *Daily Colonist*" in the running text; however, I will use the correct name in citations.

² *Daily British Colonist*, 20 February 1900, 1–8.

three types of health advertisements: ads for patent medicine (over-the-counter medicines that are trademarked under a patent and often sold regardless of their effectiveness), ads for medical practitioners, and non-medical ads for health-preserving products. While patent medicine ads most obviously built on late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gendered understandings of health, all of these ads exploited contemporary discourses of health and built on gendered anxieties to better sell their products. Examining these advertisements as they appeared in eight issues of the *Daily Colonist* over the fifty-year period of 1867 to 1917, I will argue that gendered medical advertisements are uniquely positioned to help us understand late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gender dynamics precisely due to their role in both responding to and shaping gender ideals.

In order to discuss how medical advertisements both reflected and shaped perceptions of gender, we must first understand how the form of the *Daily Colonist* affected both its advertising content and its readers' experiences of those advertisements. Advertisements were central to the form of the Canadian newspaper in the period of 1867 to 1917. Due to the cost of publishing, the majority of mid-nineteenth-century daily newspapers in Canada were limited to four pages of content and filled with as many advertisements as possible to keep up profits, with the result that "ads might consume as little as one-third or as much as three-quarters of a daily's space."³ This emphasis on ads was certainly a feature of the *Daily Colonist*: on the front cover of its 18 February 1867 issue, the *Daily Colonist* featured thirty-one advertisements, making up nearly seventy per cent of the front-page content.⁴ By 1900, the *Daily Colonist* had switched to an eight-page layout as printing costs became less prohibitive; nevertheless, advertisements still made up half of the front page articles and took up well over half of the front-page layout.⁵ In his study of nineteenth-century Canadian newspapers, Paul Rutherford shows how advertisements were designed to attract readers' eyes by making "pleasing use of white space, pictures, and type," appealing to both

³ Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1982), 118.

⁴ *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1867, n.p.

⁵ *Daily Colonist*, 20 February 1900, 1.

literate and less-literate people.⁶ Advertisements, especially illustrated ones, were thus privileged in the daily press as a means to engage the broadest possible audience. Canadian daily papers, including the *Daily Colonist*, even devoted an entire section to “new advertisements,” which “proved that the publisher looked upon his commercial messages as a feature of the news.”⁷ Readers of the *Daily Colonist* would therefore have understood advertisements as integral to their news consumption and followed the latest ads in the press in order to keep abreast of commercial trends. Advertisements are thus uniquely positioned as touchstones that can help us understand what late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers looked forward to reading in the press, the cultural trends that influenced them, and the ideals against which they measured their lives.

The most explicitly medical of the *Daily Colonist*'s advertisements were the patent medicine ads. Analyzing patent medicine ads in the nineteenth-century, Jane Marcellus explains how, in the antebellum United States, “about half of all advertising in periodicals was for drugs” and patent medicine advertising could comprise fully a quarter of the work produced by a major advertising company.⁸ Though often ineffective and even dangerous, patent medicine increased in popularity over the course of the nineteenth century due to popular distrust in doctors and their reliance on dangerous treatments.⁹ Many of the patent medicine ads in the *Daily Colonist* claimed to aid women with their supposedly flawed bodies: in 1867, S.T-1860-X plantation bitters were recommended “above all . . . to weak and delicate female and mothers [sic],” while Dinneford’s fluid magnesia was recommended as a “safe and gentle medicine for . . . delicate females and for the sickness of pregnancy.”¹⁰ Indeed, in the Victorian era, physicians understood

⁶ Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority*, 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁸ Jane Marcellus, “Nervous Women and Noble Savages: The Romanticized ‘Other’ in Nineteenth-Century US Patent Medicine Advertising,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 5 (October 2008): 787.

⁹ Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women’s Medicine* (Norton, 1979), 45.

¹⁰ “S.T-1860-X,” *Daily British Colonist*, 19 February 1867, New Advertisements, n.p.; “Dinneford’s Fluid Magnesia,” *Daily British Colonist*, 19 February 1867, Insurance, n.p.

women as uniquely “vulnerable to illness because of the very nature of [their bodies],” a perception that spread to the general populace so that images of unhealthy women became the norm in the Victorian imagination; patent medicine advertisements thus “capitalized on the images of women who were ‘worn out,’ ‘not well enough to work,’ ‘hysterical,’ or even ‘insane.’”¹¹ Because of their unique position as both news matter and popular sources of medical information, patent medicine ads reveal how the *Daily Colonist*’s original readership viewed the female body as inherently flawed and in need of medical attention, even as these ads helped shape this perception to hawk their own products.

While patent medicine ads promoted medical products of every sort, the most controversial were advertisements for contraception and abortifacients. The threat they posed to Victorian Canadian society is evident in the 1892 Criminal Code, which, as Constance Backhouse explains, banned “the sale, distribution, and advertisement of contraceptives.”¹² However, an understanding of Canadian women’s reproductive choices is first necessary to understand why they were so threatening. As Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren show, childbirth in Victorian British Columbia was a dangerous prospect: “In the early nineteenth century about one-quarter of the deaths of women aged between fifteen and fifty were related to pregnancy and its complications.”¹³ Though abortion before the quickening (the moment when a fetus recognizably moved in the womb, usually in the fourth month of pregnancy) was never illegal under English common law prior to the nineteenth century, abortion at any point in a pregnancy was formally criminalized in Canada since the formation of the dominion in 1867 (though this was the case for many British North American colonies since 1810).¹⁴ Therefore, though by 1900 the technology

¹¹ Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies: Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1991), 71; Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints*, 798.

¹² Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991), 166.

¹³ Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880–1997* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 44.

¹⁴ Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 147.

existed for abortions to be relatively safely performed in hospitals, women often had to self-induce their abortions as doctors were either afraid of prosecution or morally opposed (or both) and were unwilling to give information on contraception to avoid pregnancy in the first place.¹⁵ Methods to terminate pregnancies ranged from the tame—hot baths, violent exercises, and purgative drugs or herbs—to the extreme—“the use of douches of Lysol, turpentine, or carbide . . . to the employment of instruments: catheters, speculums, sounds, lead pencils, needles, bougies, crochet hooks, and slippery elm.”¹⁶ However, the most prolifically advertised method of abortion was abortifacients.

Because of the stigma surrounding abortifacients, advertisers of abortifacients disguised their products through euphemism. In a 1900 advertisement appearing in the *Daily Colonist* and directed towards “Married Women,” Mrs. Marion Wilmot promises a formula that would “relieve any irregularity or suppression” within five days and claimed to have “brought happiness to hundreds of anxious women.”¹⁷ On the one hand, directing the advertisement towards married women and refusing any explicit reference to abortion, Wilmot protected herself from legal prosecution while still implicitly offering abortive medicine. On the other hand, by promising to “relieve any irregularity or suppression,” the advertisement draws upon actual women’s conceptions of pregnancy. As Backhouse explains, “Most nineteenth-century women did not consider conception an established fact until the foetus had ‘quickened’” and “would not have seen herself as pregnant but as ‘irregular’ and would have been seeking to ‘bring on a period,’ something that most women of [that] era believed to be well within their rights.”¹⁸ The euphemistic nature of the advertisement’s promise for abortion was therefore legible to women readers of the *Daily Colonist*, and the paper and Wilmot could still avoid prosecution. Indeed, the extent to which abortifacient ads were legible to an early twentieth-century audience is evident in Dr. F.C. Curtis’s 1915 diatribe against these transparent ads: “Anyone can get them, they are patent medicine. . . . It is said in the

¹⁵ Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (Croom Helm, 1978), 240.

¹⁶ Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 147; McLaren and Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*, 43.

¹⁷ “Married Women,” *Daily British Colonist*, February 20, 1900, 4.

¹⁸ Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 146.

advertisement that they are used for regulating monthly flow but really and truly they are . . . [i]ntended to bring about an abortion.”¹⁹ Though the euphemistic nature of abortifacient medicine ads allowed women to believe they were exercising agency over their own reproductive choices, the abortifacients seldom worked and were occasionally harmful.²⁰ Notwithstanding the unreliability of their products, these abortifacient ads reveal that women continued to view abortion, at least before quickening, as a viable, if not ideal, option well past the criminalization of all forms of abortion from the foundation of Canada and well into the twentieth century.

While patent medicine ads most explicitly reflected the contemporary discourse on women’s health, advertisements for medical practitioners equally implied the evolving control women had over their own health. The late nineteenth century was a time of competition between doctors and midwives. Though many doctors in the nineteenth century overprescribed strong medication, leading to health complications for their patients, the general trend was towards physician-delivered births among all classes, even when employing midwives was more economically feasible.²¹ An advertisement for a midwife appearing in an 1885 edition of the *Daily Colonist* shows the tension between midwives and physicians by emphasizing the midwife’s extensive training despite being unlicensed: “Mrs. McGregor, midwife, . . . [has a] diploma and highest testimonials of proficiency from the University of Edinburgh.”²² Published in 1885, when thirty per cent of all registered births were delivered by a midwife (the highpoint of midwife employment in Victoria), this ad demonstrates that Ann McGregor, who herself would become the most active of Victoria’s twenty-seven midwives in 1896, still needed to attract more patients through advertising in newspapers, the best way for local businesses to attract patrons at the time.²³ Though this advertisement reveals how midwife-employment waned in late-nineteenth-century Victoria, it also

¹⁹ McLaren and Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*, 43.

²⁰ McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England*, 238.

²¹ Peter Baskerville, “Giving Birth: Families and the Medical Marketplace in Victoria, British Columbia, 1880–1901,” *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 413.

²² “Married Women,” *Daily British Colonist*, February 20, 1900, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

implies that women in Victoria attempted to take control of their pregnancies by seeking out what they believed to be reliable, scientific aid: doctors. Indeed, Peter Baskerville, in his analysis of birthing practices in Victoria between 1880 and 1901, explains that “shopping around for the appropriate birthing attendant was a common practice in late-nineteenth-century Victoria.”²⁴ Advertisements for birthing attendants thus offer us critical insight how women exercised agency by changing their birthing attendants, even when doing so played into the idealized and patriarchal privileging of masculine authority embodied by doctors.

Moreover, while patent medicine ads and ads for medical practitioners were explicit in their adoption of medical language, ads for health-preserving products equally made use of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century health concerns. On 18 February 1885, the *Daily Colonist* published an advertisement for Ball’s “Health-Preserving Corsets” (figure 1), whose “Misses” corset “fits the Miss and expands as she breathes, and does not injure the growing girl.”²⁵ In her examination of developing anxieties over the corset (which Victorians increasingly saw as dangerously constricting), Wendy Mitchinson argues that Victorians understood that women’s health issues originated not only from their own bodies but also from social impositions, such as fashion.²⁶ On the one hand, this 1885 advertisement draws on contemporary fears about the ill effects of the corset on developing girls’ bodies, appropriating medical language in order to better market its product. This appropriation of medical language was not uncommon in periodicals. Sarah Stage, in her examination of patent medicine ads, explains how advertisers publishing in medical journals sometimes plagiarized medical information from the publication to increase the credibility of their products.²⁷ Similarly, the advertisement for Ball’s “Health-Preserving Corsets” targeted its product name and advertisement to appeal to Victorian fears over the medical implications of their own fashion. On the other hand, this advertisement shows a

²⁴ Baskerville, “Giving Birth,” 415.

²⁵ “Ball’s Health Preserving Corsets,” *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1885, New Advertisements, n.p.

²⁶ Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies*, 71.

²⁷ Stage, *Female Complaints*, 68.

cultural shift in the understanding of women's health, no longer reliant merely on women's nature but on social impositions as well. Mitchinson argues this new cultural awareness of the effect of corsets also betrays a desire to relocate women in the domestic sphere by emphasizing their roles as mothers over fashion.²⁸ Indeed, new ideas about the appropriate roles for women were on the rise; on the same page as the corset advertisement, a column appeared expressing the *Daily Colonist's* support of women's suffrage: "we believe the time has come when the ballot may be safely entrusted to the softer sex."²⁹ In highlighting a difference between men and women in this column, the newspaper reveals its support for women's suffrage to be founded in maternal feminism, which sought to achieve the vote for women on the grounds that women—as mothers—were uniquely qualified to care for society at large.³⁰ The *Daily Colonist's* support for women's suffrage is therefore not incongruous with its gendered medical advertising as these two features of the paper were united in their deep concern with promoting women's roles as mothers. The advertisement for Ball's "Health-Preserving Corsets" therefore functions on two levels, attracting readers by appropriating medical language and appealing to maternal feminism.

²⁸ Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies*, 71.

²⁹ "Female Suffrage," *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1885, n.p.

³⁰ Cecily Devereaux, *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 20–21.

BALL'S



HEALTH PRESERVING

CORSETS

The **ONLY** CORSET made that can be returned by its purchaser after three weeks wear, if not found **PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY** in every respect, and its price refunded by seller. Made in a variety of styles and prices. Sold by first-class dealers everywhere. Beware of worthless imitations. None genuine unless it has Ball's name on the box.
CHICAGO CORSET CO., Chicago, Ill.

BALL'S HEALTH-PRESERVING CORSET is a thoroughly Durable, Substantial Corset, and when quality is considered, is the **CHEAPEST** Corset in the market.

BALL'S H. P. NURSING CORSET needs only to be tried to be appreciated, and no other will be worn after a trial but this.

BALL'S H. P. MISSES' CORSET—It fits the Miss and expands as she breathes, and does not injure the growing girl.

Figure 1: “Ball’s Health-Preserving Corsets.” *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1885, New Advertisements, n.p. Image courtesy of the British Colonist Project, <https://bit.ly/2U2R69S>.

Women’s maternity was not merely a medical issue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but a social one as well, with women defined in advertising as caring mothers in opposition to men’s lack of paternal care. A 1917 advertisement for life insurance entitled “It’s the Womenfolks who Worry” (figure 2) argues that men should

purchase life insurance so that their wives and children are not “left destitute.”³¹ This advertisement plays on women’s common contemporary anxieties about marriage, born from the gendered family dynamics of the period. On the one hand, women were responsible for setting the budgets for the family’s needs which men often ignored in favour of their own desires.³² On the other hand, women were financially tied to their husbands and, should he die, they were often left without financial recourse; this reality was especially present for women in British Columbia, where the mortality rate among young working men was inordinately high by Canadian standards.³³ This advertisement plays upon women’s supposedly fragile mental health, revealing an anxiety experienced by the many women whose husbands were the sole breadwinners of the family, as was the ideal (though not necessarily the reality) for the early twentieth century. Moreover, the advertisement plays up the connection between women and their care of children in an illustration featuring an anxious-looking woman, forehead in hand, and a slumbering child in the background.³⁴ This illustration makes clear that the child’s health and wellbeing is the primary province of women, per the “angel in the house” dynamic in which women were responsible for the maintenance of the domestic sphere.³⁵ Not only does the advertisement gender the responsibilities of the family as inherently in the feminine sphere, but it also suggests an ideal image of masculinity by inversely explaining how men fail in maintaining it: “All around us we see women and children adrift—left destitute because of man’s very human tendency to ‘put off till tomorrow’ a responsibility which involves a little self-sacrifice.”³⁶ Men are thus supposed to be financially responsible, self-sacrificing, and proactive; moreover, a man’s failure to adhere to this construction of masculinity would result in the ruin of the family. Advertisements such as this one thus function as prescriptive literature, advising against mental fragility in both men and women,

³¹ *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1917.

³² Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 33–34.

³³ John Douglas Belshaw, “The West We Have Lost: British Columbia’s Demographic Past and an Agenda for Population History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring, 1998): 43–44.

³⁴ “It’s the Womenfolks who Worry,” *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1917, 3.

³⁵ Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 20.

³⁶ “It’s the Womenfolks who Worry,” *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1917, 3.

while also providing the answer to their problem: adherence to gender normativity. And if that doesn't work, buy insurance!

It's the Womenfolks who Worry

"ONLY \$760 left after the bills are paid. It will not last long. Then, there's the mortgage. The payments on it must be met or I'll lose our home. If it were not for the children I could go out to work. But what can I do with them? I will have to do something—but what?"

"Exaggerated" you say. Not at all. All around us we see women and children adrift—left destitute because of man's very human tendency to "put off till tomorrow" a responsibility which involves a little self-sacrifice.

You sir, must realize the coming of that certain day when death or incapacity for work will cut off your present income. The distress of your loved ones if you should be taken—the suffering and humiliation which they might have to face—do you not see it? Do you imagine your wife doesn't see it?

Banish this spectre of worry from your home. Make certain that after you are gone your widow will receive—regularly—every month—as long as she lives—a cheque to provide for her every need and to give your children a proper start in life.

You can do it by means of an Imperial Monthly Income Policy. Today—while you are insurable—ask us to tell you more about it.

IMPERIAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY
of Canada

HEAD OFFICE TORONTO
Kenneth Ferguson, District Manager Victoria
Stanley Henderson, Manager for B.C. Vancouver

Figure 2: "It's the Womenfolks who Worry." *Daily Colonist*, 18 February 1917, 3. Image courtesy of the British Colonist Project, <https://bit.ly/2FECp9v>.

While anxiety about women's mental health predominated advertisements before the First World War, anxiety over men's mental stability quickly came to the fore during the war along with the advent of a novel model of masculinity in advertising: the soldier. Advertising companies took up the image of the masculine soldier to sell products to men, as seen in an advertisement for Wrigley's gum in 1917 (figure 3). In the background, the advertisement shows a group of men fighting over a piece of gum, while in the foreground, two men, calm in relation to the violence behind them, are shown enjoying the gum.³⁷ This image reveals that an implicit virtue of the Canadian soldier, and by extension men, was their civility and self-discipline, which Wrigley's evoked to market gum. Moreover, the advertisement contains a subtle reference to an underlying social anxiety over soldiers' depressed mental health, again placing gum as the solution: "Soldiers cheer [Wrigley's gum] because it cheers them."³⁸ Mark Humphries explains how by 1916, the Great War had instigated a crisis of masculinity as "half the soldiers evacuated from the front were said to be suffering from mental breakdowns due to war trauma."³⁹ In emphasizing "cheer" as a benefit to soldiers, the Wrigley's gum advertisement (circulated one year after the 1916 realization of soldiers' trauma) both recognizes trauma as a new aspect to men's lives and upholds emotional control as the persistent ideal of masculinity to which men should return. Similarly, an advertisement for electro-shock therapy (figure 4), published in the previous edition of the *Daily Colonist*, more explicitly demonstrates this anxiety over men's lack of emotional control by positioning itself as a solution: "It renews the spirit of ambition and hustle. It makes men out of slow-going, discouraged weaklings."⁴⁰ Underlying the advertisement's curative claims of electricity are the forms of ambition, hustle, strength, and vigour associated with masculinity that were now threatened by the trauma of war. Notably, while some of the advertisement's health claims for men were similar to those made by pre-war medical advertisements (such as cures for stomach trouble,

³⁷ "Wrigley's," *Daily British Colonist*, 20 February 1917, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mark Humphries, "War's Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of

Trauma, 1914–1939," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no.3 (September 2010): 508.

⁴⁰ "Electricity Acts Like Magic," *Daily British Colonist*, 18 February 1917, 12.

Advertisements thus associated themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly, with contemporary gender discourses to better sell their products. Shaping both the layout and content of their advertisements to attract readers' attentions, late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advertisers were in a unique position to mould readers' experiences of both the ads themselves and the newspapers in which they were published. In this way, whether for abortifacients or corsets, advertisements in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian newspapers not only drew upon evolving gendered understandings of medicine to market their products but also actively shaped readers' gendered understandings of health.

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