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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Clean Analgesia? A Civil War Tin for Pills of Opium...and Soap



For small-scale production of opium pills during America's Civil War, a drachm (3.89 g) of the powdered drug was mixed with 12 grains (0.72 g) of hard dry soap and molded with a dash of water into a cylindrical mass for division into 60 pills. However, the Union Army required a much more industrial scale of pill rolling. At its Medical Purveying Depot in Astoria, Long Island, New York, the Union Army employed 12 women to roll out an average totaling 60,000 opium pills daily. Men working the nearby printing press generated paper labels (right) for the japanned tins (left) that were corked after being filled with *Pilulae Opii* (Latin: little balls or pills of opium). The soap was considered an “excipient” or inert filler for the analgesic opium. Remarkably, soap was so routinely compounded with opium that, to conceal from patients that they were receiving opium, a physician could simply prescribe opium as *Pilulae Saponis Compositae* or “Compound Pills of Soap.” (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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