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A “Soothing” Syrup? How “Father” Wiley Saved Infants from “Mother” Winslow’s Morphine Elixir



From the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup (*top*) was marketed in the United States as a panacea for ailments that plagued infants: teething, diarrhea, colic, etc. To ensure happy or sleeping children like those depicted above (*lower left*), Charlotte “Mother” Winslow and her legacy firms spiked her Soothing Syrup with morphine and alcohol. Over the course of a century, sales of millions of bottles worldwide caused thousands of infant deaths. Fortunately, Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley (*lower right*), Chief Chemist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and future “Father of the Food and Drug Administration,” intervened by facilitating passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906). Several amendments further limited the sale of opioids, leading to the removal of morphine from a syrup that was more sinister than soothing. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library–Museum of Anesthesiology, Schaumburg, Illinois.)

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