Pharmacy Records at the Archives of Ontario: Their Form, Content, and Value for Research*

STEPHEN FRANCOM

This report provides a brief and very general introduction to pharmacy records at the Archives of Ontario, and to additional sources for research in Ontario pharmacy history. The recently completed processing of pharmacy records themselves involved the arrangement and description of six fonds created between 1833 and 1964 by 15 private retail pharmacies in Ontario. There now exists a descriptive inventory/finding aid for each of the six fonds,¹ and a comprehensive thematic guide including capsule descriptions of all pharmacy-related materials held at the Archives of Ontario and in other Ontario archives and collections, a chronology of Ontario pharmacy history, and bibliographies of relevant published materials.² The pharmacies, two of which remain in business under the management of descendants of their early proprietors, were situated throughout southern Ontario, in villages such as Watford and Tavistock, small- to medium-sized towns like Niagara, Stratford, Guelph, Markham, and Belleville, and large cities, including London, Toronto, and Ottawa. The fonds include records created as early as 1833 by one of the first druggist’s businesses established in Upper Canada, the Niagara Apothecary in Niagara-on-the-Lake,³ as well as records created by three of the longest surviving, continuously operated retail pharmacies in the province: Geen’s Prescription Pharmacy in Belleville,⁴ established in 1833; McLaren’s Drug Store in Watford,⁵ established in 1869; and the Pharmacie Desjardins in Ottawa,⁶ established in 1871.

Predominantly textual in form, the fonds include prescription records, account books, drug control registers, inventories, and formular-

*Stephen Francom, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1.

ies, providing a wealth of information about developments in the pharmaceutical treatment of various medical conditions; about the organization and practices of the businesses that created the records; about individual physicians, pharmacists, and patients named in the records; and about the social life of the communities in which the businesses were situated.

PHARMACY RECORDS AT THE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO

Business Records

A major group of pharmacy records at the Archives of Ontario provides detailed evidence of the organization and administration of pharmacies as business enterprises. In their way, pharmacy business records are more valuable and historically interesting than prescription records. Daybooks—itemized records of daily sales—and stock inventories provide evidence both of the type and price of products sold by the pharmacy and of trends in the volume and type of business conducted. Suppliers' invoices provide further insight into the type, cost, and source of goods sold by the pharmacy as well as evidence of the type, volume, and geographic extent of business conducted by the suppliers. Account books of various kinds, particularly those which exist in relatively complete series, are especially valuable sources of information not only about the pharmacy itself as a commercial enterprise, but also about its individual and institutional patrons and the social life of the community it serves.

Prescription Records

Prescription records comprise the overwhelming majority of pharmacy materials held at the Archives of Ontario. Prior to the enactment of the first Ontario Pharmacy Act in 1871 with its attendant regulations governing the content of prescription records and specifying legal retention periods, prescriptions were highly idiosyncratic in form, content, and manner of maintenance. On the evidence of prescription books created and maintained between 1833 and 1862 by various proprietors of the Niagara Apothecary, early prescriptions were recorded in the form of the pharmacist's transcription of a patient's or prescribing physician's written or verbal instructions. Prescription slips were not used or not retained, and it is apparent that in many cases, perhaps the majority, pharmaceuticals were issued to patients without the benefit of medical authority.

Early prescriptions tend to be undated, or at best erratically dated, and to lack any formal system of numerical control or identification. They rarely indicate the price charged or the name of a prescribing phy-
sician; virtually never include physician’s instructions to the patient; often do not identify the constituent elements in pharmaceutical compounds; and tend to be remarkably diverse, including not only standard pharmaceutical preparations, but also formulas for patent compounds manufactured and/or marketed by individual pharmacists and preparations for non-medicinal purposes such as cosmetic and cleaning mixtures. Numerous preparations issued for domestic farm animals indicate that early pharmacists were dependent for much of their business on veterinary prescriptions.

With the advent of the 1871 Pharmacy Act, prescriptions became increasingly standardized in form and content. Formal prescription slips then appeared, often printed forms bearing the letterheads of prescribing physicians and/or pharmacists. Prescriptions are now systematically dated and inscribed with pharmacy-assigned control numbers for identification, audit, and replication purposes. Prices, constituent ingredients, and the prescribing physician’s name and instructions are regularly noted. There is also an evident trend toward an exclusive emphasis in prescriptions on preparations for medicinal purposes: prescription records created after 1870 are increasingly less likely to include preparations for cosmetics, inks, and domestic cleaners—the sort of thing that represented a large part of the business of early pharmacists.

The preferred means of preserving and maintaining prescription records from the 1870s well into the 1920s involved storing prescription slips on an interim basis on simple spike files and on a permanent basis in bound volumes of various sizes and styles into which individual slips were pasted in chronological order. Some of the larger, more prosperous operations, such as the Cairncross & Lawrence pharmacies in London, used for this purpose custom-made blank folio volumes with attached index books specially made by commercial blank book manufacturers. Smaller concerns used whatever bound volumes lay to hand. In at least one case the volume used for this mundane purpose was revealed to have considerable intrinsic historical value: an original House of Commons Committee minutebook from 1870 was used in 1895-96 by the Ottawa pharmacist Thomas Payment (later Mayor of Ottawa) as a scrapbook in which to file prescriptions. The prescriptions were removed by the Archives of Ontario Conservation Unit and the original minutebook was microfilmed and ultimately transferred to the National Archives.

Annotations by pharmacy staff found in bound prescription books often provide valuable insight into the pharmacy’s operations and staffing arrangements. For example, prescription books created and maintained between 1907 and 1919 by the London pharmacy Anderson & Nelles have been annotated with the names, addresses, and dates of
service of various clerks and apprentice druggists employed by the pharmacy, along with, in some cases, the date of the apprentice’s graduation from the Ontario College of Pharmacy.

A third phase in the evolution of prescription record storage was established in the 1920s with the popularization of prescription transfer files, shoebox-sized cardboard boxes housing a ring-binder-like mechanism with twin locking hoops on which prescription slips were attached through holes punched in the top of the form.

Some of the most interesting and valuable prescription records, from the perspective of the documentation of social history, are official forms which illustrate the operation on a practical level of legislated social programs involving public health issues. For example, Anderson & Nelles prescription books created and maintained between 1916 and 1922 contain two series of government-issued and audited prescription forms intended to regulate, respectively, the dispensation of liquor under the *Ontario Temperance Act* of 1916\textsuperscript{11} and subsidized medical services to indigent World War I veterans under the auspices of the Military Hospitals Commission (1915-19) and the Department of Soldiers’ Civil Re-establishment (1919-28). These records provide important evidence of the practical operation and administration of these programs, and, in the matter of liquor prescription forms, strongly suggest that physicians and pharmacists were routinely complicit with patients in evading the legal prohibition against the non-medical use of alcohol.

Another intriguing feature of the prescription records is the evidence they provide of the extensive clinical use and—until the 1930s—the general lack of effective regulation of narcotic drugs. On the evidence of the prescription records examined during this project physicians routinely issued prescriptions for such substances as cocaine and opium with great frequency and often for the relief of a multitude of seemingly trivial ailments, from toothache to generalized fatigue. This cavalier attitude is reflected in the early pharmacists’ record-keeping procedures. Prior to the 1930s no special provision is made for the separate and confidential maintenance of narcotic prescriptions. It is only with the advent of the first effective legislative control, the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act* of 1929,\textsuperscript{12} which regulated the receipt and sale by prescription of narcotic substances, that pharmacists were legally obligated to maintain discrete narcotic prescription records.

Along with veterinary and narcotic prescriptions and official prescription forms pursuant to legislated social programs involving the regulation of pharmaceutical services, a fourth significant subset of prescription records are those which were specifically intended for infants and children. Voluminous prescription records exist which identify the patient as an infant or child. Collectively these provide important evi-
dence of the extent, quality, and trends in the use of pharmaceuticals in the clinical treatment of infants and children.

Genealogists and others studying the lives of specific individuals will find prescription records useful in providing confirmation of the presence and activity of specific persons in specific places at specific times, and, in some cases, additional personal information such as addresses and occupations. Prescription records also support evaluative studies of the prescribing practices and clinical judgment of specific physicians; generalized research into trends in the treatment of illness with prescription drugs and developments in the clinical use of specific pharmaceutical substances and compounds in the treatment of specific medical problems; studies of the contemporary cost of drugs and pharmacists' dispensing fees; and research in the evolution of business forms and record-keeping equipment for pharmacies.

Confidentiality/Access to Pharmacy Records

One of the most difficult problems encountered during the process of arranging and describing the pharmacy records at the Archives of Ontario concerned developing a policy governing public access to records containing sensitive personal information. Much of the difficulty results from the absence of clear guidelines in the form of legislation or binding directives by the governing professional body. The records of private retail pharmacies are not subject to the provisions of the Ontario Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA). Successive versions of the Ontario Pharmacy Act have paid little more than vague lip service to the competing interests of the confidentiality and public accessibility of pharmacy records. No version of the Act has specifically defined information which should be subject to access restrictions, let alone established concrete guidelines outlining terms and conditions for public access to such records. The Ontario College of Pharmacists has not, as yet, developed and issued any binding policy directive to its members regarding the maintenance, control, and provision of public access to records created and maintained by private retail pharmacies.

In administering public access to pharmacy records the Archives of Ontario has generally taken the approach that records containing sensitive personal information such as prescriptions, narcotic and controlled drug registers, and customer accounts journals are restricted for 100 years from the date of their creation. The Archives has specifically avoided linking access decisions to the biological status of individuals named in the records: the death plus 30 years standard enshrined in FIPPA has often proved inapplicable due to the difficulty of determining whether individuals are alive or dead or their exact date of death.
Exceptions to the 100-year rule are made on a case-by-case basis, depending on archivists' evaluations of each researcher's demonstrated need to view the records and the researcher's willingness to sign a formal research agreement which prohibits the publication of personally identifying information.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES FOR RESEARCH IN ONTARIO PHARMACY HISTORY

Supporting evidence exists for research in Ontario pharmacy history, including census records, newspaper advertisements, historical atlases and local histories, and partnership declarations and letters of incorporation maintained by the Archives of Ontario and the Companies Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Commercial and Consumer Relations.

City directories provide basic information about the dates of operation, physical location, ownership and staffing, growth, and stability of retail pharmacies. Those including street directories often give fascinating evidence of the physical circumstances in which early pharmacists conducted their business: for example, the original Cairncross & Lawrence pharmacy was established in London in 1886 in buildings shared by a shoe upper manufacturer, a livery stable, and a Brethren in Christ meeting room.

Student records and pharmacy registrations are maintained by the Ontario College of Pharmacists, dating from its incorporation in 1871 under the original Ontario Pharmacy Act. Included are student transcripts and, since apprenticeship remained a formal aspect of the professional education and certification of Ontario pharmacists into the 1940s, records of each student's apprenticeship, including information about the student's master or preceptor. Access to these records is controlled by the College Registrar and, unfortunately, the College has tended to be less than accommodating to researchers.

Commercial registers created and maintained by credit-rating agencies such as Dun & Bradstreet offer another valuable resource. The Archives of Ontario maintains microfilm copies of Dun & Bradstreet reference books covering the period 1864-1978. The reference books include information about the type of business conducted by individual commercial enterprises and estimates of their composite financial value and credit-worthiness. Such records are useful for establishing the dates of operation, ownership, types of business conducted, and trends in the financial stability of specific retail pharmacies. One of the most useful pharmacy history research tools published in the past decade, the Ontario Drug Store and Druggist List 1851-1930, was compiled using Dun & Bradstreet reference books.

Finally, estate files offer another source for pharmacy history. Maintained in Ontario since 1793 by the Surrogate Court in each county, and,
from 1793 until 1859, by the Central Probate Court in York, these records are available on microfilm at the Archives of Ontario within the Court Records group. Estate files typically include wills, applications for probate by executors, witnesses' affidavits, letters probate, and estate inventories. Applications for probate provide detailed information relating to the transfer of ownership in an estate and are thus extremely useful for clarifying the often complex relationship between early commercial pharmacies and their various predecessor and/or successor bodies. Wills and estate inventories provide unique evidence of the type and volume of business conducted by the pharmacy, the nature and value of its real property, and the types of equipment used in conducting business. Two articles by Jennifer Connor and Jean Harris provide an overview of the historical value of Ontario estate records and a useful list of individual Ontario health practitioners, including pharmacists, active between 1793 and 1900 for whom estate records exist.

NOTES

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1 Archives of Ontario (AO), Niagara Apothecary Papers, F 1373; AO, Cairncross & Lawrence Papers, F 1385; AO, McLaren’s Drug Store Papers, F 1386; AO, Pharmacie Desjardins Papers, F 1387; AO, Markham Drug Co. Papers, F 1393; and AO, Geen’s Prescription Pharmacy Papers, F 1498.

2 AO, Pharmacy Records at the Archives of Ontario, T7.

3 AO, Niagara Apothecary Papers, F 1373.

4 AO, Geen’s Prescription Pharmacy Papers, F 1498.

5 AO, McLaren’s Drug Store Papers, F 1386.

6 AO, Pharmacie Desjardins Papers, F 1387.

7 Statutes of Ontario, 1871, c. 34.

8 AO, Cairncross & Lawrence Papers, F 1385.

9 AO, Pharmacie Desjardins Papers, F 1387.

10 AO, Cairncross & Lawrence Papers, F 1385.


12 Statutes of Canada, 1929, c. 49.

13 AO, Dun & Bradstreet Papers, F 244.


15 AO, Court Records, RG 22.