



‘Sequah’: crown prince of charlatans

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century, quackery of all kinds was on the increase. One of the most notorious of the mountebanks was ‘Sequah’, arguably the arch-prince of charlatans, who first made his appearance in the 1890s. He is described as "the most celebrated medical operator in Britain outside the capital". Sequah started his medical career at Portsmouth in September 1887. In January 1888 he was practising at Brighton and in June 1888 in Dublin. Reports from these and other towns throughout the United Kingdom reveal the technique behind his triumphs:

"The inhabitants of the town would be shaken by the sound of a brass band and a bass drummer parading through the streets in a colossal golden carriage and handbills distributed by local gamins informed them that Sequah had arrived."

Who Sequah was would be revealed at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and again at 8 o'clock in the evening at the place advertised, which was generally a circus ground, market place or town centre. At the appropriate time, Sequah arrived in a horse-drawn wagon dressed in the manner of an American cowboy accompanied by a troop of other cowboys and American ('Red') Indians in feathered headgear. In appearance he was tall and sallow and spoke with an American accent. He reminded one journalist of Fennimore Cooper's 'Last of the Mohicans'.

Having mounted the golden chariot, Sequah began his work with an exhibition of tooth-drawing and, showing a set of over a hundred dental instruments, offered to extract bad teeth gratis and without pain from anyone who cared to step up.

A queue would soon form, glad to save the fee of five shillings charged for the same service by a local chemist or dentist. According to the reports of local papers the following is an account of the proceedings:

"Sequah strapped an electric lamp to his forehead and set to work with his forceps apparently removing teeth with astounding speed, 50 teeth in half as many minutes at Cardiff or at Hastings 317 teeth in 39 minutes - eight per minute. The patient had scarcely opened his mouth before Sequah had pulled out a tooth, held it up to the crowd, put it under the patient's hat and sent him on his way. The operations were accompanied by the continuous playing of the brass band which distracted the patient and drowned any cries of pain."

The speed of the performance caused the spectators much amusement, which was indeed the object. Having obtained the applause and goodwill of the audience he then went on to give a serious talk on dogmatism in medicine. Although doctors knew all about anatomy and physiology they could not cure disease. Medicine was still an inexact science. He condemned the fact that so little time was spent on therapeutics and drugs. He quoted examples of the discovery of quinine and cocaine from the Peruvian Indians.

This brought him to the revelation that he himself was in possession of two remedies that he had come across by studying the pharmacopoeia of the Apaches and other American tribes. He regaled his audience with tales of his adventures among the Indians, describing how he had discovered certain roots and herbs in Dakota and Montana which he had learned to combine with a special mineral water only found in the Far West.

The result was a medicine called 'Prairie Flower', which contained ingredients unknown to medical science and which when used together with another Indian remedy, in the form of an embrocation, gave instant relief from rheumatism.

There followed a demonstration of the efficacy of the remedies on a 'volunteer' from the audience who had been suffering from rheumatism. The dramatic change in his condition was proof enough of the amazing properties of the cures. Sequah then offered to give the medicines free to anyone who could prove that they could not afford the price. Then the real business began with the selling of the medicines. Sometimes people fought and shoved each other in order to get to the carriage to buy his cures which also included his 'Indian Dentifrice'. Invariably, Sequah would stop selling before the demand was satisfied. There would be more opportunities to buy Prairie Flower, Oil and toothpaste.

Several analyses were made of the medicaments and during Sequah's visit to Edinburgh in December 1888 the *Edinburgh Evening Despatch* commissioned the city's public analyst to analyse the preparations. He reported that the Indian Oil consisted of "oil (possibly whale oil) and turpentine, and possibly a small quantity of some essential oil." Prairie Flower was "aloes, alkaline carbonate (potash or sodium), alcohol and probably extract of capsicum or pepper, whilst the dentifrice was carbonate of lime [chalk] and starch." One fact which did emerge was that the preparations did not cure the rheumatic conditions as claimed. Many of the conditions were exaggerated and there was a fair degree of acting. The miracle cures were never subjected to any kind of follow-up and later accounts suggest that there was a prior arrangement with many of the 'patients'. Turning to the tooth-drawing exhibition, a hostile witness reports as follows:

"I have seen the quack draw several teeth with great rapidity, and I have twice seen him make no less than ten efforts at one tooth without drawing it. He has then bundled his wounded patient off and extending his fingers towards the crowd in front, shouted 'ten' in such a way as to make his audience believe he had drawn ten teeth."

The same witness also reported on another case as follows:

"A local dental surgeon was summoned to attend a man whom he found thoroughly prostrated as a result of copious haemorrhage and shock to the system...his condition was brought about by the treatment he had received at the hands of the 'Yankee quack' who, in attempting to extract the lower right molar, managed to close his forceps at random betwixt that and the first molar, which was sound, the former being carious. The consequence was that he smashed both teeth, leaving the roots embedded in the gum. An examination revealed that severe injuries had been inflicted, the alveolus [the bone supporting the teeth] being actually fractured, while the gum was extensively lacerated. This exposed pulp being in a state of hyperaesthesia [extreme sensitivity], gas had to be administered before the dental fragment could be removed with the aid of a surgeon who was called in."

Nevertheless, there was no shortage of patients willing to show how brave they were: "The novelty of having your teeth drawn with a trombone playing near your right ear, a big drum beating near your left, and the eyes of a delighted crowd following every contortion of your features has an attraction in it almost irresistible."

The extraction was as much a trial of the patient's courage and good humour as of Sequah's dexterity. If they failed to co-operate, their cowardice not Sequah's incompetence would be presented as the cause. In order to attract publicity and good-will, he participated and contributed to many charities - he even had clergymen and mayors commending him for his good works. His advertisements were unusual too, and he published his own newspaper the Sequah Chronicle. He made sure that when he left, the local pharmacies had purchased large stocks of his cures and the newspaper reports of his exploits were inserted in the local paper of the next town he would visit.

For example:

"Sequah has been doing a roaring trade (Dundee), Sequah has fairly captivated the people (Oldham), Sequah is carrying all before him (Leeds), Sequah is attracting large audiences (Ipswich), Sequah has taken the city by storm (Lincoln). ...Sequah's preparations - 50,000 bottles already sold in Edinburgh."

He was reported to have been in Edinburgh in December 1888 where a lady in the audience recognised him as her long-lost brother and therefore the son of an Edinburgh brewer. It was claimed that he was a medical student at the University but left before he completed the course to become a showman in the Wild West.

But another account by a Dundee reporter in 1908 and one quoted in the Chemist and Druggist on 11 July 1908, was that Sequah had told him that he was a Scot born in the village of Bankfoot in Perthshire and simply had adopted the American name Sequah for professional purposes. A considerable number of accounts of Sequah's exploits are reported in the *Chemist and Druggist* because of his activities in the field of patent medicines and his questionable dealings with the local chemists. These activities fall outwith the scope of this work, therefore only an abridged version has been given.

Returning to the identity of Sequah; his real name was William Henry Hartley, and he was probably born in Yorkshire in 1857. It soon became clear that there were several Sequahs active throughout the country, each one with his own exhibition; in other words, Hartley was operating a franchise business. Many called themselves dentists; for example, William F.H. Rowe who toured as a Sequah. Another was Charles Frederick Rowley, also a Sequah. The organisation continued to grow with Hartley himself as Managing Director and in March 1889 it became a limited company with its head office in London. The lynchpin of the Sequah organisation was James Norman, an old fairground professional and proprietor of a travelling freak-show.

Norman helped Hartley to recruit Sequahs and hire grounds and sites around the country. He was also much in demand as a trouble-shooter in the not infrequent disputes between the Sequahs and their associates. By September 1890 there were twenty-three Sequahs on the road throughout the United Kingdom.

Although Scottish towns had been visited on many occasions by the Sequah circuses, a special connection with Glasgow was established when Norman introduced into the business two young Glaswegians, Peter Alexander Gordon and his wife Betty. They had been part of Norman's travelling road show, in which they performed a mind-reading and clairvoyant act under the stage names of James and Esther Kasper. Peter Gordon had a

talent for public performance which was handed down in his family as he was the son of Dr J.F.S.Gordon, Episcopalian Minister of St Andrews, Glasgow Green. Dr Gordon was not only a scholar but also a vigorous and unconventional preacher who attracted huge crowds to his Sunday evening lectures.

Kasper was given a job as secretary to the Sequah in Cork ostensibly to take charge of stock and accounting, but was also told to report every other day to London on the activities of the Sequah. After a number of incidents which he had handled well, he returned to London where he was appointed a Sequah and given his own wagon. He was given two weeks' training in extracting teeth and a salary of £3 per week plus 12 1/2 % on all sales over £50. The contract obliged Kasper to carry on business "in and through Great Britain and Ireland, the Colonies of Great Britain, Europe and the United States of America, Mexico, South America and the West Indian Islands." Eventually as the business continued to expand, Sequah launched Sequah Ltd. as a public company with a share capital of £300,000. (The scale of this flotation can be gauged from a comparison with that of Boots, the chemist, whose share capital in 1888 was a nominal £80,000.)

Among the shareholders were 80 men in the pharmaceutical retail trade, six surgeons, five medical practitioners, and 11 clergymen - but no dentists.

Sequah performed in Edinburgh in the old Waverley Market twice daily in December 1888. Often fighting broke out between Sequah and the medical students whom he had attacked and vilified. The students would heckle, shouting, 'Science against quackery!' and it was only the intervention of the police that would prevent a riot. Sequah and his employees were also involved in numerous appearances before the courts involving breach of the peace, assault and fraud. Many of the charges arose out of actions by Sequah's employees who frequently intimidated local chemists who would not buy stock from them. Window smashing was their favourite activity. Eventually Sequah's empire started to crumble when the Inland Revenue caught up with him in connection with the Medicine Stamp Act, first introduced in 1783. Vendors of proprietary medicines were required to affix stamps whose value depended on the selling price of the medicine. Additionally, those who sold medicines had to have a licence to do so. Sequah was refused a licence because his mobile wagons were not in accordance with a newly-passed law that the licence was for a 'set of premises', and his wagons did not meet this description. His singular method of selling was now illegal.

Although the Medicine Stamp Act was the instrument which brought Sequah's activities to an end in Great Britain, another factor was that around this time fresh attempts were made to regulate fairs, stamp out freak shows and control other trades. There were rumours that the Government had used the new Act to destroy Sequah on behalf of some other faction, possibly the police, magistrates, the pharmacists or even influential medical men. All had reason to regard him as a menace.

Sequah turned his attentions overseas and sent Sequahs to Cape Town, Madras, Kingston, Jamaica, Buenos Aires and Gibraltar. In addition representatives were in Belgium, France, Spain and the Netherlands. Monte Video was also visited as was Ontario, Canada. There were even Sequahs sent to Java, the Straits Settlements, Burma and Japan.

But competition and Government restrictions on medicine selling in ever-increasing areas gradually proved too powerful and the company was finally wound up on 12 October 1895. The creator of Sequah, William Henry Hartley, died at the age of sixty-six on 16 January 1924 leaving the sum of £734.

The Sequah story illustrates, to some extent, the perception of dentistry held by a considerable section of the population. Tooth extraction was still a subject fit to be seen at the Music Hall; an entertainment which, along with the exhibitions of 'laughing gas', had drawn the crowds in the first half of the nineteenth century. Dentistry was not viewed as being an integral part of health care, it was more akin in many people's minds to the province of the corn remover and freak-show manipulator. Sequah's contribution had been to perpetuate this image by his superb showmanship, psychological insight and business acumen. He was a past-master in the use of these methods to exploit to the full the widespread gullibility of the majority of the public in the field of medicine and dentistry in this period.

An illuminating post-script to the Sequah saga is provided by the *Journal of the BDA* in November 1890. The journal published an extract from the *Medical Press and Circular* which in turn quoted the *Wexford Free Press*. This paper reported the proceedings of the Kilkenny Board of Guardians. It appears that there had been a visitation of Sequah to the city of Kilkenny and the usual scenes had been enacted.

The maimed, the halt, the lame and the blind assembled with crutches, eyeshades, splints and so forth as the evidence of their locomotor and other incapacities. Having been ushered into the Sequah carriage, they were "rubbed with the prairie flower, restored to vitality and sent on their way bereft of crutches and rejoicing; and from that day afterwards they were seen walking the streets with gratifying agility."

Three of these patients, however, were in receipt of poor-law outdoor relief because of their condition, and as they were now seen to be able to walk the streets and to work if they pleased, the Board stopped their weekly allowance. They now appeared before the Board to show cause against the stoppage. The first of them, confronted with the fact that he had been seen about the town without the stick which he had carried as long as the Guardians subsidised him for doing so, pleaded that while Sequah was in town he had been obliged to get along without artificial aid, because if he had been seen using the stick he would have lost the daily wages that Sequah paid him. He asserted that the 'Medicine Man' from the Far West was in the habit of renting cripples who appeared among the crowd, were duly hustled into the wagon, rubbed and 'cured' and got two shillings for every day during the visit on the strict condition that they carried no stick and walked with an erect carriage.

Another of the patients stated that if any of them absented themselves for a day from the show, he received an immediate post-card requiring his attendance. The article concludes with the proviso that the truth of the statements cannot be vouched for, bearing in mind that "the word of an outdoor relief pauper is not good for much, especially when money is in the question, but we think it well to give our readers the opportunity of judging for themselves."

* *The Development of Dentistry. A Scottish Perspective c.1800-1921.*
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