

Use of Medicines in Northern Jutland, Denmark, in the 1790s

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Aalborg Swan Pharmacy's prescription book

The Chemist's Collection at Jens Bang's House in the town of Aalborg, Denmark, includes a so-called pharmacy prescription book from Aalborg Swan Pharmacy, which was kept in the period 1794–1806.¹ The book is a form of protocol in which the pharmacy recorded copies of prescriptions brought in for dispensing. The book is the oldest known source of information about the activities of a Danish pharmacy as a supplier of medicines to the local population.

Our knowledge of the use of medicines in Northern Jutland in the 1790s is based on a study of the prescriptions recorded in Aalborg Swan Pharmacy's prescription book. The pharmacy dispensed these prescriptions from 1794 to 1798 to patients in Aalborg Diocese, that is, the regions of Vendsyssel, Han Herrederne and a large part of Himmerland.² The diocese had about 88,000 inhabitants and an area of about 6,000 km². The prescriptions from that period were issued by Knud Nicolai Carstensen, M.D., senior medical officer in Aalborg Diocese. The study includes 568 patients and 1,232 prescriptions for about 2,200 medicines.

The prescribed medicines

Diocese physician Carstensen based his prescriptions on the pharmacopoeia in use at the time, "Pharmacopoea Danica 1772". About one-third of Carstensen's prescribed medicines were described in the pharmacopoeia, while he composed the others himself, primarily as combinations of the substances and preparations mentioned in the pharmacopoeia. Carstensen's extensive use of individually prescribed medicines for his patients was in keeping with the existing view of the practice of medicine as an individualized art.

As for cost, a calculation shows that the average price of a prescription medicine was 22 skilling [old Danish coin], corresponding to one day's wages for a workingman.

Medicine users

The data from the pharmacy prescription book and contemporary census papers have made it possible to identify patients with regard to gender, social status and address.

The study shows that the number of patients in Aalborg Diocese who received prescription medicine from Aalborg Swan Pharmacy in the period 1794–1798 amounted to 0.7% of the inhabitants.

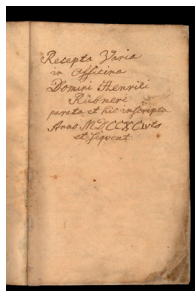
According to the prescription book, the body of patients comprised a household's family members as well as their servants.

The division by household occupations of patients and prescriptions recorded in Aalborg Swan Pharmacy's prescription book in the period 1794–1798.

Household occupation	Patients (in %)	Prescriptions (in %)
Clergymen	29.9	36.4
Landowners and large farmers	25.4	26.7
Parish clerks	7.2	5.9
Farm owners	3.2	5.2
Leading district councilmen, customs inspectors and other high-ranking civil servants	6.9	4.7
Merchants and other tradesmen	6.9	4.1
Scribes, customs officers and other low-ranking civil servants	4.4	3.1
Colonels and other military personnel	1.1	1.8
Farmers, smallholders and labourers	1.6	1.0
Skipper and fishermen	1.1	0.6
Craftsmen	0.9	0.6
Forest ranger and other employees	0.5	0.4
Unidentified household occupations	11.1	9.6
Total	100.2	100.1



Photo of Jens Bang's House in the town of Aalborg from 1851. The house was built in the years 1623–1624 and has been the domicile for the Swan Pharmacy since 1665.



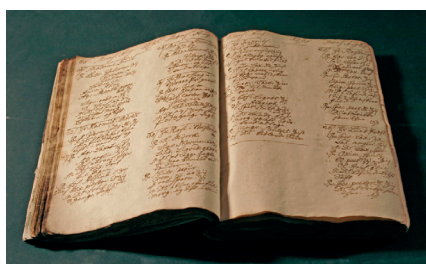
The title page of the Swan Pharmacy's prescription book 1794–1806.



Silhouette of the chemist Henrik Rübner (1732–1798), owner of the Swan Pharmacy from 1778 to 1798.



Silhouette of the Hvass family at Randrup Manor in Himmerland, which is mentioned several times in the prescription book.



Reference to the prescription book.

The table clearly shows the marked division of patients and prescriptions by household occupations. Together, households headed by clergymen, landowners or large farmers represented far more than half of patients and prescriptions. Thus clergymen and their households accounted for 29.9% of patients and 36.4% of prescriptions, while households of landowners and large farmers accounted for 25.4% of patients and 26.7% of prescriptions. The figures for the households of parish clerks followed with 7.2% of patients and 5.9% of prescriptions. Next came the following groups whose households each accounted for 3.2–6.9% of patients and 3.1–5.2% of prescriptions: farm owners, leading district councilmen and other high-ranking civil servants, merchants and other tradesmen, as well as scribes and other low-ranking civil servants. Ordinary people such as farmers, smallholders and labourers comprised only 1.6% of patients and accounted for only 1.0% of prescriptions.

At the time, treating illness with prescription medicine was a costly affair for the majority of the inhabitants in the extensive Aalborg Diocese. In addition to the cost of the medicine, the household had to pay the doctor's fee and travelling expenses in connection with contact between physician and pharmacy. This explains why it was mainly well-to-do households who used prescription medicine to treat illness.

However, financial circumstances alone cannot explain the marked evidence that together households headed by clergymen, landowners or large farmers, or parish clerks represented about two-thirds of patients and prescriptions, because the clergymen and parish clerks had lower salaries than many of the other professions mentioned above.

A further explanation is connected with the Danish Epidemic Act of 1782. According to this act, landowners and large farmers had a duty to report an infectious disease among the country people in their domain to the medical officer. Furthermore, the local clergyman and parish clerk were responsible for the patients' compliance with the medical officer's medicine prescriptions and other instructions for treating and combating the disease in question. In this way, the landowners and large farmers, clergymen and parish clerks were players in the health service. For that reason, they would have found it more natural than other well-to-do heads of a family to contact the physician and the pharmacy in case of illness in their households.

A head count of patients recorded in the pharmacy prescription book shows that men comprised 54%, women 22% and children 24% of patients. However, this predominance of men seems improbable and in many cases is no doubt caused by the custom of naming the payers of medicines — male heads of family — on the prescriptions, although the medicine was prescribed for other persons in their households.

The study of diocese physician Carstensen's prescriptions dispensed by Aalborg Swan Pharmacy to patients in Aalborg Diocese in the period 1794–1798 represents only a part of the medicine consumption in Northern Jutland in this period. As mentioned earlier this group only comprised 0.7% of the inhabitants. In addition to the diocese physician and the Swan Pharmacy in Aalborg, the district included six lower-ranking medical officers, so-called district surgeons, two general surgeons plus the Lion Pharmacy in the town of Hjoerring. The total medicine consumption in Northern Jutland was thus administered by nine people authorized to prescribe medicine, as well as the population who administered their own medicines purchased from the two pharmacies.

References

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2. Kruse P.R., Kruse E. Brug af lægemidler i Nordjylland i 1790'erne – belyst gennem Aalborg Svane Apoteks receptbog. [Use of Medicines in Northern Jutland in the 1790s – illustrated by Aalborg Swan Pharmacy's Prescription Book]. Aalborg: Apoteker S.C. Strøbyrge's Fond til Bevarelse af Jens Bangs Stenhus og Nordjyllands Historiske Museum, 2008.