



## From soap to suppositories – ‘new’ uses for *Sphagnum*

Robin Stevenson describes an interesting use for *Sphagnum*.

Popular texts on bryophytes generally contain at least a section on uses of bryophytes, e.g. Porley & Hodgetts (2005), Richardson (1981) and Glime (2007). *Sphagnum* is usually prominent in these accounts through its use as a wound dressing during World War I because of its absorptive and antiseptic properties.

However, on a recent visit to an antiques market I came across a *Sphagnum*-containing product I had never seen referred to before – Sphagnol Soap – produced by a British company called Peat Products (Sphagnol) Limited. A search on the web produced several useful references to this company and its various products.

Each bar contains 15% pure Sphagnol, which is said to consist of ‘*Emollient Vegetable Tars and Oils*’. The ‘active ingredient’, Sphagnol, appears to have been a distillate of peat, prepared by the calcination of the peat itself. Details of the chemistry of this mysterious distillate are not available, leading one to the suspicion that a certain amount of scientific mumbo-jumbo may have been involved. The product was, however, said to be ‘*delightful in use*’.

The company was in existence at least as early as 1899, since a testimonial of that date from Dr Carl Peters, wrapped around each bar, states that it not only helped prevent prickly heat on his expedition to the Zambesi district, but also cured one member of the expedition of piles! (Carl Peters was a German explorer and journalist, who

helped to explore what became German East Africa. His reputation was somewhat tarnished by allegations of cruelty towards the Africans, but he was considered a German hero by Hitler.)

The soap appears to have come into its own during World War I. A contemporary note describes its composition and uses: ‘*It has been used with success ... in the treatment of eczema, dermatitis, pruritis and other skin troubles ... striking testimony from surgeons and officers at the Front as to its efficacy in the treatment of trench sores, face wounds and insect bites.*’ (Anon., 1916)

An advert in a New Zealand nursing journal (Kai Tiaki, 1919) expands the list of products to include, besides the soap itself, ointment, suppositories and shaving soap, stating that all of these products had been awarded a certificate of purity, quality and merit by the Institute of Hygiene.

A Science Museum display – *Exploring the History of Medicine* – illustrates a bar, stating that it had been used during both World Wars to treat facial wounds and trench sores. The bar they illustrate bears the inscription ‘*Toilet & Nursery Antiseptic Soap*’ and suggests the company continued production up to 1960. It displays a more modern form of packaging than the bars illustrated in the photo (right), whose frilly paper surround suggests they may have been a presentation pack. Each bar is

wrapped in a sheet bearing testimonials, and the box cost 2/6d for the three tablets.

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