Fun with Abbott Labs
Dear Doctor Postcards

By Tom Fortunato
A 2020 presentation for the Rochester Philatelic Association
See more about them at http://www.deardoctorpostcards.com
You may have seen these postcards before in dealers boxes and wondered what they were. Commonly called “Dear Doctor” postcards they were sent out by drug manufacturers to doctors and medical personnel advertising specific drugs. Each was mailed from an exotic locale with an interesting native scene on the front and the sales pitch on the reverse, typically starting with the salutation “Dear Doctor,” hence their nickname. Abbott Labs headquartered in Chicago, Illinois sent theirs out between 1956 and 1968. Over 180 face-different postcards in 10 languages and sent to 36 countries and territories have been documented to date with subtle and not-so-subtle differences found on the message side. They’re now over 50 years old!

This presentation will introduce you to the wealth of variety among them. Plan to have fun!
All Abbott postcard mailings advertised one barbiturate drug, trademarked “Pentothal,” their brand name for thiopental sodium. It was widely used as an anesthetic injection used to put pre-op patients to sleep. It may be more familiar as “truth serum” to the spy-era generation of the 1950s and 1960s.

Each Abbott postcard mailing was sent to as many as 250,000 recipients. Most were trashed as junk mail, while others kept them as curiosities--thankfully!
Let’s first look at a postcard’s deltiological differences. All mailings used native cards originally printed in their country of use. Here’s an example of a card used from Chile showing Rio Mapocho in the capital of Santiago. Abbott printed their own message and other details over these. That included the postcard’s left half and sometimes the text in the center vertical section, as you can see on the card on the right.

Abbott’s overprinting is the source of Dear Doctor card non-philatelic differences and varieties.
We’re going to start out with an easy one. Look closely at these two cards. Other than the person each is addressed to, what’s different about them?
Absolutely nothing! The complete mailing of these cards from Greenland was accomplished on only one day using the same stamp and postmark.
Same card on the left, different card on the right. Any difference between these two?
The written message is the same and in the same handwriting, but spaced differently. The right card is missing “Dear Doctor” and was sent to a nurse. “Nurse” was used on later mailings.
Same card on the left, different card on the right. What’s the difference?
The right card was sent to Canada, and yes, Canada is spelled wrong! None the less it arrived at its destination. There’s one more difference between these. Did you catch it?
“Trade Mark” was added under the drug name on the card sent to Canada.
Here’s an easy one, both mailed to Canada. What’s the difference?
Parles vous français? Even if you don’t read French, the recipient of the right postcard was expected to. The doctor had also moved!
Dear Doctor:

I was taught and espoused the use of PENTOTHAL® as a method of anesthesia in various forms of surgery. I am now actively engaged in the practice of anesthesia in various parts of the world and in Europe. I can attest to the safety and effectiveness of PENTOTHAL® throughout the world.

Abott

Perhaps you prefer Spanish, as in this example to Peru? Other postcards from this mailing are known to have been sent to Argentina, Belgium, the Belgian Congo, Germany, Italy, and Sweden.
Can you spot what’s different between these two cards, one to the US and one to Canada, other than the text of one appearing darker than the other?
Again, there is a difference showing a registered mark on the US card and “Trade Mark” text on the Canadian card, but now on the vertical dividing line.
This mailing was sent from the warmer climate of French Polynesia and the island of Tahiti. What’s the difference?
You’re right if you noticed a difference in message “handwriting.” In fact, four are known. This part of each card was printed, not handwritten! Addresses appear mimeographed on, also in different “fonts.”
Both of these cards from Florence, Italy were sent to Canada, one in English, one in French. But why is one message in script and the other typed? Not sure. The French text goes into a bit more detail.
Pay attention to the center dividing line on the message side. In some cases you will find a small letter at the bottom of it that relates to the language of the card. With a very few exceptions here they are...

A = English text to doctors or hospitals in USA
B = English text to doctors in Canada
C = English text (no salutation) to nurse-anesthetists in USA
D = French text
E = Dutch text
F = Greek text or German text
G = Italian text, Spanish text, or Portuguese text
H = Spanish text
I = not recorded/reported
J = Swedish text
K = Swedish text
S = Swedish text

as compiled by Roger Cichorz of Boulder, Colorado
If you’ve been paying attention so far, you’ll remember to look for the following that may differentiate one card from another based on deltiological aspects…

- Salutation present or missing
- Language of the message
- Message “handwritten” or typed
- Address label used or printed directly on the card
- Image found on the picture side of the card

But there are plenty more philatelic varieties to look for among Dear Doctor postcards! Philatelists, there is real postal history here!
Although only postcards sent from India were endorsed “BY SEA MAIL,” all Dear Doctor postcard mailings were sent at the surface rate, the least expensive method of posting to reduce costs.
Sometimes different stamps were used bearing the same postage total going to the same country, as shown here. Also note the use of the “Dear Nurse Anesthetist” salutation on this 1966 mailing instead of being absent on pre-1964 mailings. There was a different message to doctors versus nurses.
Look closely. Why might the left postcard have 4½d postage from Australia while the one on the left have only 3d?
As part of the British Commonwealth, mail from Australia to Canada was able to travel at a reduced rate, in this case at a 33% discount from the US rate. Most Abbott mailings took place over several days rather than just a single day like this one.
Are you up for a challenge? Specialize in one of the Abbott mailings that took place over an extended time. Mailings from Ruanda-Urundi are recorded as posted between July 17, 1959 to October 9, 1960.
Postmark collectors will find a wealth of varieties.
Dear Doctor:

In England, too, Pentothal has been the subject of many medical papers. Indeed, Pentothal is the most widely studied agent of its kind the world around— with more than 4,000 published reports.

Abbott

PENTOTHAL® SODIUM (Sodium Thiopental, Abbott) 522

First day cover collectors will find material, too!
Dear Doctor,

Newfoundland — gateway to Eastern Canada. 30 years ago a new intravenous anaesthetic stood on the threshold of medicine: Pentothal (thiopental). Since then it has successfully been used by doctors across Canada and around the globe. Pentothal will be of great benefit to patients in your own hospital.

Dr. Alfred H. Rees,
17th Claremont Ave.
Kitchener, Ont.

Dear Doctor:

Here in Quebec just as elsewhere, modern surgery is practiced. Pentothal solution has been the subject of an impressive series of papers in the medical press. World wide, more than 1500 articles have been published on intravenous anesthesia with Pentothal since Abbott introduced the drug in 1954. On this solid clinical background rests a growing appreciation of Pentothal’s advantages.

Richard T. Shugart, M.D.
Officier-Noir Section
CHLINGHAM ARMY HOSPITAL
DENVER, COLO., U.S.A.

Cher Docteur,

Il n’y a pas, dans le monde entier, d’anesthésie intrave-nueuse plus sûre et plus efficace que le Pentothal Sédative. Pour la trouvaille de Panama, caravanier international comme partout où se pratique la chirurgie moderne.

Abbott

As will precancel and meter collectors.
Finding postcards with auxiliary markings of any kind are a plus, especially those that can help determine how long it took a card to reach its addressee.
Let’s summarize some of philatelic aspects to look out for...

- Stamps used
- Destination country
- Rate of the postcard mailing
- Cancellation used
- Date of the cancellation
- Auxiliary markings of any kind
Now for bloopers! Yes, even postcard printers make goofs.
Someone mixed up western Canada with South America!
Ooops, did anyone de-dupe the mailing list? Some recipients saved everything! Note that one of these was postmarked at 9 AM and two in the same hour, 6 PM.
A favor mailing, including a handwritten tag line and address?
I hope you found this presentation interesting. Perhaps you may be the next person to get hooked on collecting “Dear Doctor” postcards! Check out the web site!