We can learn much from looking at a society’s popular medicines and health notions. In the case of commercial products, the goal is to sell as much as possible. Ads that conjure up a fear of some hitherto unknown ailment often work well, as do those that play on fears about the health and development of one’s children. The ads in the following slides are more often aimed at women than men. They rely on combinations of traditional imagery and symbols and the notion that we live in a modern age of science. Some products have strange-sounding foreign names that conjure up an image of scientific medical intervention.
Brushing the teeth was not a well-established custom in early twentieth century Japan, and so toothpaste and tooth powder companies had to create a market by encouraging the practice. Appeals to glamour were common. The ads are for the same product. The one at left is from the Meiji era; the one at right from the Shōwa era. Notice the difference in what is glamorous at each time.
“The essential defense against insects for your home” says the slogan at top right. Camphor and other aromatic substances like naphtha were used to prevent moths from laying eggs in clothing and for other aspects of the battle against bugs. Camphor is camphor, and so image (and probably price) would have been especially important in garnering market share. Wisely, Fujisawa adopted the image of Shōki, the traditional slayer of demons in both Japan and China, as its mascot. If Shōki can slay demons, Fujisawa camphor can surely keep moths at bay.

The next slide features two more Fujisawa camphor ads from the Taishō era.
In addition to repelling insects, the ad at the right also claims efficacy at repelling humidity.

Fujisawa Camphor, featuring Shōki the demon queller.
Here are two fine blood-fortifying tonics with exotic, foreign sounding names. At the right is something we might call “Blutose” by Fujisawa. At left is Somatose, a tonic featuring meat protein, brought to you by the good folks at Bayer.

Both ads are from the Taishō era.
Here’s a dictionary definition of balsam:

“1a. Any of several aromatic resins, such as balsam of Peru and balsam of Tolu, that contain considerable amounts of benzoic acid, cinnamic acid, or both, or their esters. b. Any of several other fragrant plant resins, such as Canada balsam. c. A similar substance, especially a fragrant ointment used as medication; a balm. 2. Any of various trees, especially the balsam fir, yielding an aromatic resinous substance.”

Siccarol, Taishō Era
This product has a very medicinal sounding name, which, for English speakers might suggest a cough syrup or perhaps some kind of stomachic (digestive aid). But the product here is an after-bath powder for cosmetic use.

Beauty Hair Wash Powder, Taishō Era
The text is written in what appears to be Japanized Korean, presumably understandable to either a reader of Korean or Japanese. It says this product is an ideal hair wash for men or women. Why Korean? Because Korea was a Japanese colony at this time.
Here’s a great-sounding name for a patent medicine. The yellow text says it is a “High unit vitamin B1 tonic” and the blue text says that it is good for fatigue of the digestive tract (or fatigue and the digestive tract) and that it fortifies your general energy and provides nutrition.

Such vague claims combined with a medical-sounding name are common today as well. This kind of marketing works. Wouldn’t you like to be as vigorous as her? Metabolin!
Another Shōwa-era product for vigorous people by Takeda. Saxylon would seem to be an ointment of some kind, but the yellow-brownish characters in the background say it is a pill or capsule (the word “pill” partly covers the medicine container, lower right). It treats external injuries such as cracks, frostbite, scrapes, skin abrasions, etc. Like Metabolin in the previous slide, this medicine has a scientific-sounding name, and the graphic image is excellent.
Portamin blood supplement and strengthening tonic, Shōwa era

Two more fine products from our friends at Takeda. At left is blood supplement with a vitamin-sounding name. The text of the baby food ad says “Instead of the mother’s breast, use [cow’s] milk and ‘roron.’” Roron suggests something fancy, though it is probably just a brand name for sugar.

Infant-rearing Sugar Shōwa era
Here are two ads for Fatoshin Pustule (or something like that), a cough pill, whose name doesn’t sound so great in English. The ad at the right invites the reader to “use two fingers instead of five.” Shōwa era.
Surely you don’t want your child to grow up to be a wimp or a weakling. Then, just to be sure he does not, give him Oriize (or some such sounding brand) Growth Tonic. In very small letters under the Oriize brand name, we are told that it consists of “sunlight vitamins.” Just as the sun makes plants grow tall, so too can this fine product make your sons grow tall and manly. The slogan alludes to sunlight: “Brightly banish wimpiness.”
Dorikono is a straightforward type of product, albeit absurd in its claims. The glasses cod liver oil ad is a little more unusual. The yellow text says “Early to sleep, early to rise--sleep well!” How exactly cod liver oil applied to glasses helps regulate the natural cycle is not obvious to me. Notice the clock gears--an emblem of modern life.

Dorikono, a Shōwa-era strengthening drink that “immediately turns to blood, to stamina” after being consumed.
Makunin Pills, Shōwa Era. “The authority of a worldly roundworm eradication medicine” says large red text. The diagrams in the box explain the cycle by which roundworms invade the body, multiply, and spread. The images to the right show the spread and transmission of roundworms (starting with nightsoil-fertilized agricultural fields), the images bottom center show some effects of roundworm infestation, and the images top left show hygienic practices that prevent the transmission of roundworms. And then there are Makunin Pills, of course. The figure at the far top right in red is Shōki the demon queller, and Makunin Pills are a product of Fujisawa (see the camphor ads earlier).
Trachoma: “A contagious disease of the conjunctiva and cornea, caused by the gram-negative bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis* and characterized by inflammation, hypertrophy, and formation of granules of adenoid tissue. It is a major cause of blindness in Asia and Africa.”

The trachoma poster is especially interesting. It says “Your eyes are important!” followed by a series of slogans about the spread, prevention, and ill effects of trachoma (see dictionary definition above). Notice all the symbols of the modern world. The point, of course, is that with compromised eyesight, your ability to function in and contribute to this world is limited.
Repay [Your Debt to] the Nation Fly Paper, Shōwa Era

The Hoshi stomach pills ad is interesting because it uses an old notion of spirits or demons of disease. The fly paper is even more interesting because it invokes the modern notion that citizens owe a debt to their nation, which, in this case can be repaid by using a particular brand of fly paper! What’s the logic? Well, the white text on the black background explains that flies spread germs all over the house. So, presumably, a less germ-infested house might lead to better health and thus better ability to serve the nation. It’s a stretch, but appeals to patriotic sentiments can sell products.