

Macaura's Pulsocon A Vibrating Massage Device

What was Macaura's Pulsocon?

Macaura's Pulsocon was a hand-held vibrating massager, which was applied to the body as a cure for a range of different illnesses. Vibration became a popular method of treating various medical conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as it allowed people to tend to their own complaints at home. The Pulsocon was sold from around the 1900s to the 1920s, though it was later re-branded as a 'Blood Circulator'. The operator held the device at one end whilst placing the other end on the body of the patient. By turning the crank handle quickly up to five thousand vibrations per minute could be produced.



The Macaura Pulsocon

The Pulsocon was a mechanical massager, which vibrated as the crank handle was turned. Every device had a patent number imprinted on it, reassuring customers that it was an authentic model.

Macaura claimed that the Pulsocon could cure many ailments, including constipation, rheumatism, paralysis, asthma and heart disease. It was also advertised as 'splendid' in the treatment of 'diseases of women', though Macaura acknowledged it had little effect on cancer, baldness, blindness, and tuberculosis. The strong vibrations of the Pulsocon were supposed to arouse activity in the deep-seated organs, and improve blood-flow around the body.



Women using a Macaura device at home

Accompanying booklets for the Pulsocon included many images of the device being used. Macaura told his audience that it was worth remembering that cures 'by mechanical means' were 'more permanent than by any other known treatment'.



The Pulsocon was produced by the British Appliances Manufacturing Company in Leeds, which was owned by Macaura. Each instrument came with a lengthy booklet giving instructions on how to use the Pulsocon, and advice on healthy living, eating and exercise. It also came with differently-shaped attachments, for applying the Pulsocon to various parts of the body.

Who was Dr Macaura?

Gerald Joseph Macaura was an American inventor and medical man, who moved to Europe early in the twentieth century. He travelled around Britain, giving demonstrations of the Pulsocon and advertising widely in regional newspapers and magazines. Macaura often presented testimonials from members of the public who claimed to have been cured by his invention, and some journalists even conducted surveys to check Macaura's claims.

Members of the medical profession were not convinced by Macaura's credentials, and labelled him a 'quack' and a 'swindler'. Macaura stated that he was a graduate of the National Medical University in Chicago, but it was soon discovered that he was not a qualified doctor. In France, where he had also marketed the Pulsocon, Macaura was arrested for falsely practising medicine. In May 1914 he was fined 3,000 francs and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

What role did patents play for Macaura?

Macaura patented his device, and several improvements he made to it, in countries around the world. His patents referred particularly to the cog



mechanism inside the Pulsocon, which was a new method of creating vibrations. Macaura warned his customers against ‘cheap and worthless imitations’, and his company said it would ‘not be responsible for any machine which does not bear the Patent No. 13932 stamped upon it’.

Macaura wrote that he was not concerned with accumulating extreme wealth, and that he would happily hand over the ownership of his patents if he thought others would carry on producing the Pulsocon to benefit the nation’s health. Newspapers rejected his words as ‘bunkum’ and a marketing ploy.

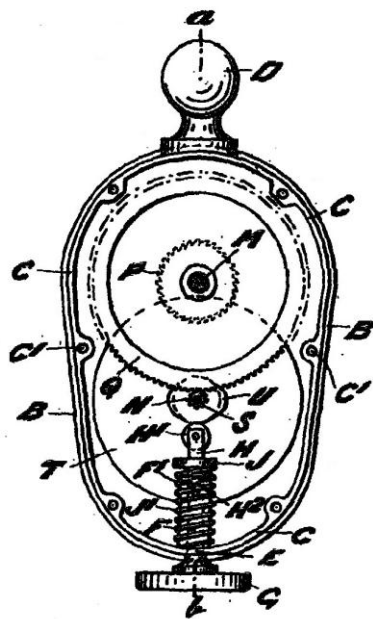


Fig. 1.

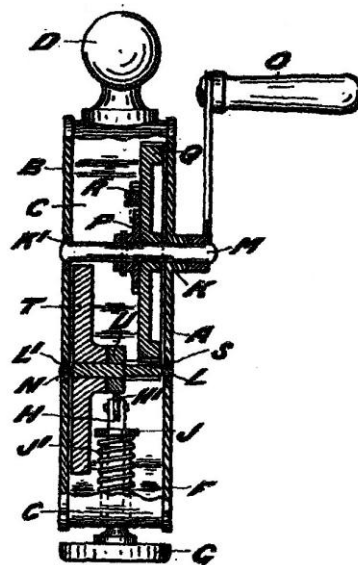


Fig. 3.

Plan of the Mechanism in a Macaura Pulsocon

These drawings were included in Macaura’s patent application for his improvements to the design of vibrating massagers. The number for this patent was included on all the devices Macaura sold.

In 1914, there was a Parliamentary Committee to discuss patent medicines in Britain. The Committee noted that Macaura’s device was exorbitantly priced and of little medical value. Yet whilst he had been imprisoned in France, he had been able to make over £60,000 profit in England. This was seen as proof that British medical patent laws were inadequate, and new recommendations were made to improve them.

Members of the public still continued to buy Macaura’s vibrating machines, and when he returned from France, he continued to patent further improvements to the design. One model even provided a means for stimulating the patient with electricity as it vibrated. Macaura did not, however, continue to refer to himself as a doctor.