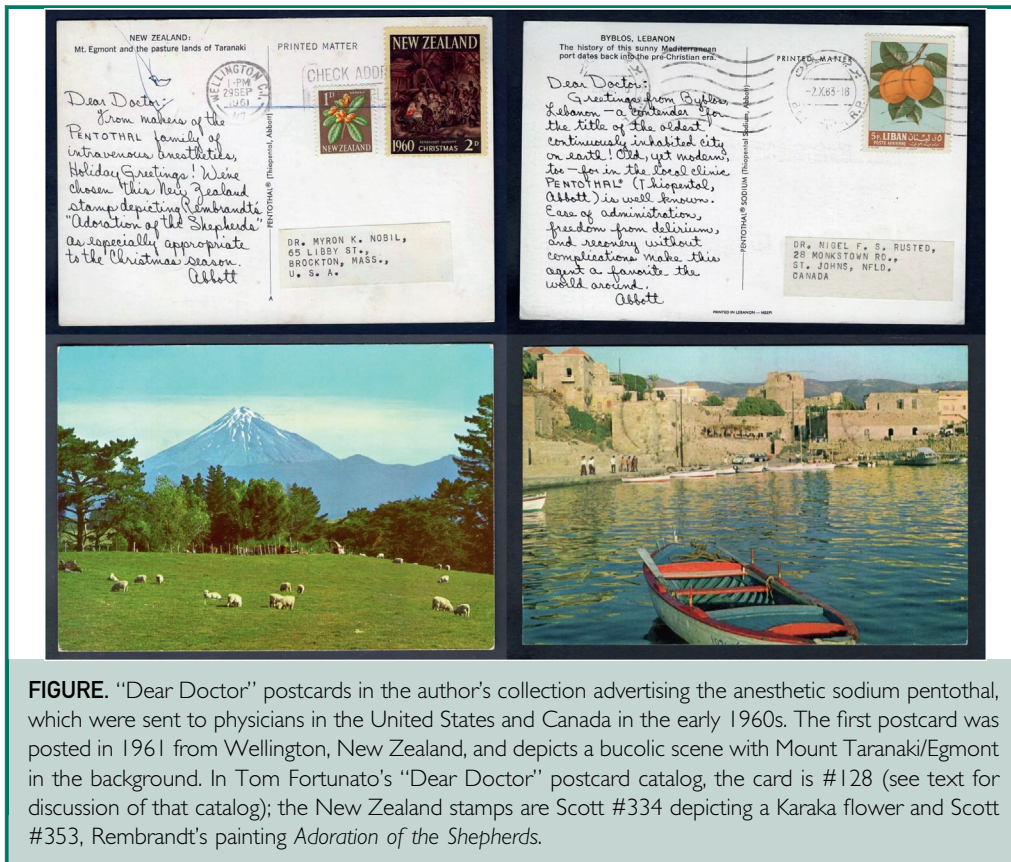




# The “Dear Doctor” Postcards of the 1950s and 1960s: An Advertising Method With A Global Philatelic Flair

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**FIGURE.** “Dear Doctor” postcards in the author’s collection advertising the anesthetic sodium pentothal, which were sent to physicians in the United States and Canada in the early 1960s. The first postcard was posted in 1961 from Wellington, New Zealand, and depicts a bucolic scene with Mount Taranaki/Egmont in the background. In Tom Fortunato’s “Dear Doctor” postcard catalog, the card is #128 (see text for discussion of that catalog); the New Zealand stamps are Scott #334 depicting a Karaka flower and Scott #353, Rembrandt’s painting *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

Stamp Vignettes focus on biographical details and accomplishments related to science and medicine, and not individual views and prejudices except where they had a major impact on the subject’s life. The authors do not intend to imply any endorsement of such views when discussing a Stamp Vignette on Medical Science.

**P**harmaceutical companies have always advertised their products to physicians. In a small number of countries,

including the United States and New Zealand, they market directly to consumers as well. In the 1950s and 1960s, physicians in the United States and some other countries would occasionally receive postcards from around the world touting specific drugs. These postcards used the stamps of the local country or territory from which they were mailed. In that era, when international travel was less common than it is today and stamp collecting

From Ajax Therapeutics, Cambridge, Massachusetts (D.P.S.).

was a popular hobby, postcards posted overseas that bore foreign stamps and postmarks would more likely be read and saved by the recipients, compared to an ordinary advertising circular, which might be ignored and quickly tossed in the rubbish bin.

The messages on these postcards often used a font that mimicked handwriting, and were written in a breezy, familiar style, as if they had been sent by a friend or colleague who was on holiday in the foreign country. They were mass produced and sent with preprinted mailing labels using ground or surface mailing rates, and typically did not use the more costly international airmail rates. The Christmas-themed postcard in the figure, for example, was mailed from New Zealand in September 1961, anticipating it would require several weeks to reach the United States by ship.

Advertising postcards had been sent to French physicians as early as 1947 by Laboratories Biomarine (La Biomarine) of Dieppe, France, but by far the most prolific “Dear Doctor” advertiser was Abbott Laboratories of Chicago, Illinois. Abbott used these cards almost exclusively to advertise the anesthetic sodium pentothal. Abbott sent out more than 200,000 cards in at least 10 languages between 1954 and 1968. In 1954, pentothal’s patent was expiring, and the drug was losing market share to newer short-acting barbiturates. Researcher Asher Orkaby and anesthesiologist Sukumar Desai described this shift in “The Death of Sodium Pentothal” published in *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* in 2021. The postcard advertisements might therefore be considered a “desperation move” by Abbott marketing executives to preserve shares of brand-name pentothal. Pharmacist George Griffenhagen (1924-2019), a former curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s Division of Medical Sciences, catalogued dozens of these cards in an article in the October 1984 issue of *Scalpel & Tongs*, a journal for medical topics on postage stamps.

The website <http://www.deardoctorpostcards.com/> run by thematic stamp collector Tom Fortunato of Rochester, New York, includes a useful bibliography and a numbered gallery of Abbott “Dear Doctor” postcard images. Fortunato notes that Burroughs

Wellcome was known for sending these cards to physicians in the United Kingdom, and that “Dear Doctor” style cards were also sent by Pfizer, G.D. Searle, and E.R. Squibb & Sons. In addition, the former Spanish company Antibióticos S.A. of Madrid, several Belgian firms (Belgana, Delacre, and Pharmacie Centrale de Belgique/PCB of Brussels), Canadian Poulenc Limited of Montreal, and a few German and French companies also sent advertising postcards to physicians. The Swiss company Nestlé even used similar postcards to advertise coffee, and other (mostly European) firms used internationally mailed postcards to sell various consumer goods.

By the early 1970s, these postcards were falling out of favor among advertisers, possibly because international travel was becoming more common and less exotic, and perhaps also because physicians had tired of them. But “Dear Doctor” cards still are readily available to collectors and remain of interest to both topical philatelists and deltiologists (ie, postcard collectors.)

The second card was posted in October 1963 from Lebanon and depicts the port of Byblos/Jbeil; the stamp is Scott #395 and shows a pair of figs, while the postcard is Fortunato’s #087. The recipient of the first postcard, Dr Nobil, was a Yale-trained obstetrician who died in California in 2006; the street address is that of Brockton Hospital in Massachusetts, where he was on the medical staff for a time. The recipient of the second postcard, Dr Rusted was a noted surgeon in Newfoundland who died in 2012 at the age of 104 years. This card was sent to his private home address in St. John’s, but this house also was once a private hospital opened in 1913 and operated by Miss Mary Southcott, a nursing superintendent.

## POTENTIAL COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no competing interests.

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