What was the Overbeck Rejuvenator?

The Overbeck Rejuvenator was an electro-therapy device which could be used by members of the public to treat their own illnesses and ailments at home. It had metal electrodes shaped like combs and paddles, connected to a large battery. By applying the electrodes to the affected part of their body, users could let a gentle, restorative current flow. Overbeck claimed that the Rejuvenator could be used with success on all conditions except for ‘deformities’ and diseases caused by germs.

Using the Overbeck Rejuvenator to treat hair loss

Promotional material for the Rejuvenator showed the device being used for various conditions, including some which patients might be reluctant to consult a doctor about. These included deafness, ‘nervous’ disorders and baldness.

The Rejuvenator held by the Thackray Museum was donated in 1997. It was bought to treat deafness, but never used. It is probable that lots of people suffering from persistent, minor ailments were given the Rejuvenator as a gift. It is currently on display in the museum’s “Magic and Medicine” exhibit.

Overbeck marketed his Rejuvenator extensively, and it was sold throughout the world. Adverts appeared in prestigious newspapers such as the Times, and included the testimonies of medical professionals and delighted users.

One wrote how he felt ‘like a new man’ after using the Rejuvenator for just three months. Another remarked on ‘the wonderful results’ after the
Rejuvenator gave him ‘unbounded energy, high spirits, and a marked zeal’. For further publicity, Overbeck also gave theatrical public demonstrations of the Rejuvenator, including one in 1930 at the Savoy Hotel in London.

Sales of the Rejuvenator were so great that Overbeck was able to buy a grand residence near Salcombe, in Devon, in 1928. Here he collected exotic plants, and opened the gardens to the public.

**Who was Overbeck?**

Otto Overbeck was an eccentric chemist, who made his fortune through a range of inventions. He lived from 1860-1937.

Overbeck had a good scientific education and graduated from University College London in Chemistry in 1881. He was elected a Fellow of the Chemical Society in February 1888. This gave him prestige, yet Overbeck never became a laboratory scientist. Instead he went to work in industry and became the Scientific Director of Hewitt Brothers’ brewery in Grimsby, in the early 1890s.

Overbeck patented several of his inventions while working in the brewing industry. As well as machines for use in brewing beer, he also patented an early rival to the popular beef drink Bovril. Having ‘largely the flavour, appearance and characteristics of a meat extract’, Overbeck’s yeast-based ‘Nutritious Extract’ was a prototype of Marmite.
Overbeck was familiar with patents well before developing the Rejuvenator and was able to use the complex patenting system to his advantage.

**But how did Overbeck use patents?**

To protect his invention Otto Overbeck took out several patents. He applied for his first patent on the Rejuvenator in 1924 in the UK. He then obtained patents in other countries for modifications to the device. Over the next 5 years, he was granted 10 further patents for the Rejuvenator. He commissioned the Ediswan Company to manufacture the Rejuvenator, and the British Ever Ready Electrical Company to make the large, custom-designed batteries.

The patents were part Overbeck’s overall marketing strategy. He used his own scientific status, describing himself as an ‘eminent British scientist’ in promotional pamphlets and advertising. He made sure that customers had to buy replacement batteries from him, and encouraged satisfied users to send letters. These could then be used as testimonials of the Rejuvenator’s health benefits. The patents were displayed prominently on the inside of the box, assuring the user of authenticity and quality. The Rejuvenator was modified over the following years, and Overbeck even launched a more elaborate ‘Supreme Model’ with extra electrodes.