Elastoplast Elastic Adhesive Bandage
An Everyday Medical Technology

What are the Bandages?

We are all familiar with bandages and plasters in the home. Although they are now very commonplace, the original Elastoplast adhesive bandage of the late 1920s was specifically designed for doctors, and were often carried as part of a set when visiting patients. If the doctor saw fit, he would apply the first bandage himself, then instruct the patient how to replace it.

By the time that the bandage which you can see above was produced in the early 1970s, Elastoplast was already a widely-respected household name across the world. The bandage came with a set of detailed instructions in both English and French, indicating how it was to be used. According to these, the bandages had “soft, fluffy edges which prevent damage to devitalised skin.”

How was Elastoplast invented?

Elastoplast dressings were devised in 1928 by employees at T. J. Smith & Nephew, a firm which was originally founded in 1856 as a small dispensing chemist’s in Hull. The original Elastoplast was an adhesive material, which
could be used for various different kinds of bandages. Smith & Nephew alerted doctors to their invention in the British Medical Journal in 1929, and Elastoplast was on display at the 1931 London Medical Exhibition. In contrast to modern Elastoplast, the original bandages were marketed to the medical profession.

ADHESIVE BANDAGES AND DRESSINGS.

Messrs. T. J. Smith and Nephew, Ltd., Neptune-street, Hull, and London, Glasgow, and Manchester, have called our attention to “Elastoplast” adhesive dressings and bandages, whose chief feature is that they are easily moulded to the shape of the surface to which they are applied, and that they are non-irritant. The fabric base of “elasto-

Announced in the British Medical Journal

T. J. Smith and Nephew announced the invention of their new “Elastoplast” in the prestigious British Medical Journal in 1929. It has since become a household name.

Thomas James Smith (1827-1896) trained as a pharmacist in Grantham and later at University College, London. He set up his own business in Hull, and enlisted the help of his nephew, Horatio, just months before he died in 1896. They were able to move into new areas, and quickly began to manufacture wound dressings. The business grew steadily, and by the 1920s Smith & Nephew had offices across the UK and were able to employ a team of medical innovators. Today, Smith & Nephew is one of the biggest medical device companies in the world and features in the FTSE100.

How were patents involved?

Because they were a medical supply company, Smith & Nephew were not bound by the same restrictions as doctors. It was clearly understood that such companies had to protect new innovations for the sake of their business.

Even after the success of the original product, Elastoplast underwent subsequent developments. In 1954, for example, Smith & Nephew patented a new kind of fabric for use as a bandage. They used this patent in a number of ways. Firstly, they were able to secure renewed protection for their innovation. Secondly, they could continue to profit from producing Elastoplast. Finally, they proudly emblazoned their products with the new patent number – “British Patent Number 713838” – which helped to persuade potential purchasers of the quality of Elastoplast. It is unclear
whether the patent printed on the tin of Elastoplast above had lapsed by the time of manufacture. It was common for medical tools to bear patent numbers which had already expired.

In addition to the ongoing strategy of ownership, Smith & Nephew also trademarked “Elastoplast”. This far lengthier form of protection meant that only they could use this name; it set their products apart from their competitors. Elastoplast is still trademarked to this day.