

Quacks, Charlatans and Mountebanks:
Gifted Entrepreneurs of American Medicine

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Donizetti, in his opera buffa of 1832, *The Elixir of Love*, pairs a country bumpkin, Nemorino, with Adina, a capricious landowner who laughingly spurns him. Nemorino languishes until a snake-oil salesman blows into town, riding in a wagon hung with posters touting his miraculous cures. The presiding charlatan, Doctor Dulcamara, sells Nemorino a nostrum that he says will end all his woes. After taking the elixir, Nemorino finds himself lively and greatly admired by the village girls. Adina suddenly takes new interest in Nemorino, for which Nemorino credits Doctor Dulcamara's love potion. But it's not so. Adina has learned that Nemorino has inherited a fortune. It's really his new wealth that has attracted her. Nemorino never knows this, but he gets the girl, Dr. Dulcamara's business booms, and the opera concludes on a happy note.

Somewhat later in the 19th century, Richard Wagner retells the Celtic myth of *Tristan and Isolde*, the story of a tragic romance stimulated by a powerful love potion.

Quackery, of course, long antedates these revealing 19th-century operas. In fact, the quack's visit to the village square is a recurring theme of painters, printmakers, and writers, reaching back to the day, so Voltaire said, "when the first knave met the first fool."

The antiquity of quackery does not surprise us, but what does is the persistence of quackery, especially in America. After all, we believe that America was founded on Enlightenment thought. We consider ourselves to be reasonable people who can cause error to vanish simply because of our innate good sense. Problems are for solving, quickly and totally, we believe, and each success lifts us to ever-higher levels of attainment. But despite it all, poverty, bigotry, violence, and, yes, even quackery, persist.

American thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries believed that quackery was a transitory evil, its existence sure to disappear once the populace was better schooled, when science expanded its horizons, or when government enacted protective laws. But here's what happened:

In 1906, Congress passed a law requiring that only a modicum of accurate data be listed on the labels of patent medicines. Bona fide physicians were hopeful that quackery would be finally controlled. The press was jubilant. But the incidence

of medical chicanery barely slowed. It was not until 1938 that Congress passed another bill to address the still-festering sore of chicanery. By that time, even though science had expanded greatly and the public had become better educated, and hopefully less gullible, the incidence of quackery persisted.

Despite the advent of penicillin and other wonder drugs developed during World War II, America rediscovered quackery in the 1950s and embraced it. It seems that quackery had attracted still another generation of get-rich-quick operators culled from the now worldly-wise returning soldiers who had observed overseas just how profitable quackery could be.

But why did quackery persist despite all the predictions of its demise? It's a curious and complex tale that involves a subtle dance among three parties: the patient, the orthodox medical practitioner, and the quack.

The Patient and the Quack

Since the beginning of time, human beings have craved miracles, especially miracles involving health, a recurring and fundamental need that has assured the continuing success of charlatans. Most humans will do almost anything to prolong life, relieve pain, or eliminate suffering. Some of us hope for everlasting life, and many of us look for cosmetic perfection. The medicine men, the snake oil venders, the leaders of healing cults have all sustained themselves on the fact that people are not content with the achievements of science and turn to quack practitioners who they believe can cure their real or imagined ills. It seems that no one is immune. Mighty intellectuals, scholars of all descriptions, jurists, and politicians alike seem to be as vulnerable to quackery as is the commoner.

The Credentialed Physician and the Quack

It is worth noting that until well into the 20th century, medical education and medical practice were essentially unregulated. Neither was the drug manufacturing industry. America in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a particularly fertile ground for quacks. Formally trained physicians were few in number and broadly dispersed throughout the vast reaches of the new country. Their treatment regimens were limited. They consisted mainly of lancing, bloodletting, purgative emetics, and surgery, which often produced dubious results at painful cost. Quack doctors offered similar treatments to a very willing audience at lesser cost, generally with less pomposity and condescension than the local doctor. So to the average American layman, the line between the quack and the physician was easily blurred.

The quack doctors well understood the powerful combinations of ignorance and superstition, of hope and vanity, and exploited the public's wariness of conventional medical treatments by soliciting testimonials from satisfied customers. It was through these testimonials that the quacks developed trust and established their reputations.

Medical museums sprung up in cities, traveling medicine man shows thrived, and vast pages of newspaper advertising were devoted to the promotion and sale of unproven and sometimes dangerous nostrums. There was a lot of money to be made.

Many local and regional newspapers, especially in the American West, were kept afloat by the steady influx of advertising dollars spent by competing patent medicine promoters. Many of the first almanacs were originally given away as promotional items by patent medicine manufacturers. Medicine shows, which were traveling circuses of sorts, offered muscle-man acts, which enabled the promoters to demonstrate the vigor one could expect from using their cure-all.

A successful example was the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, founded by a Bee County, Texas, farmer, Charlie Bigelow. Bigelow hired American Indians dressed in tribal garb to promote his nostrum, "Kickapoo Indian Sagwa," claimed to be a cure for everything from indigestion to constipation to rheumatism. Bigelow's nostrum was the inspiration for Al Capp's "Kickapoo Joy Juice," featured in the comic strip "Li'l Abner."

By the early 20th century, orthodox physicians and other investigators began to publicize instances of death, drug addiction, and other hazards associated with unregulated nostrums and elixirs. Organized medicine, representing the credentialed doctors of the day, predicted once again that the patent medicine game would retreat. Because of all the bad publicity, they thought, the quacks were done for. But the angry gods and other demons of ancient days still lurked.

Quackery Persists

It seems that as long as there has been a medical problem to solve and money to be made, charlatans, quacks, and mountebanks have been ready to step forward to take your money. The new generation of quacks now relied on pseudo-scientific jargon and convoluted machinery to convince the public of their medical merit. Electricity, radio, and electromagnetism were the rage at the turn of the 20th century.

Enter Albert Abrams, M.D. Born in San Francisco, educated at the prestigious University of Heidelberg, Germany, he received his M.D. degree in 1882. He became a professor of pathology at the Cooper Medical College, the precursor of today's University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine. He was a noted teacher, clinician, and well-known writer on matters medica. After several years of traditional medical practice, Abrams departed from medical orthodoxy. He developed a series of electronic medical devices, which he claimed, could cure just about any disease or ailment. A diagnosis was made from a single drop of the patient's blood placed in an electronic machine called the Dynamizer. The machine operator attached an electrode to the forehead of an assistant who was stripped

bare to the waist. The operator then repeatedly struck the assistant's abdomen with a mallet. Vibrations coming off the assistant's abdomen indicated to the doctor the nature of the patient's disease!

Abrams' treatments became popular across the world, stimulated by a series of weekend courses taught by Abrams himself. Organized medicine, already skeptical of his methods and his claims, became concerned enough about his worldwide popularity that they decided to put Abrams out of business. His downfall began when a skeptic mailed a drop of blood he had taken from a rooster and sent it to an Abrams practitioner for analysis. The diagnosis was malaria, syphilis, diabetes, and cancer. The American Medical Association (AMA) publicized the results. The bad publicity which ensued brought an end to Abrams' power. Still, he had already made his fortune with his machine. When he died in 1924, his assets totaled over a million dollars.

No discussion of American medical quackery is complete without mention of John R. Brinkley, who transplanted goat glands into male patients, and of Morris Fishbein, M.D., editor of the AMA journal JAMA, who tried to stop him. Brinkley never graduated from medical school but bought his M.D. degree from a diploma mill for \$100. He was a bigamist, a drunkard, a liar, and a con man of incredible audacity. He was a man of superior guile and a marketing genius of unbeatable gall. Apart from his medical adventures, he revolutionized advertising on radio and helped to popularize country music and the blues on his radio station, which was established to promote his clinic, whose main purpose was to rejuvenate sexual prowess in men by surgically implanting goat testicles. Goats were an inspired choice, since the goat's appetite for sex was well recognized.

His fame rose on the basis of testimonials, but his treatments were ineffective and dangerous. At least 42 patients entered his hospital vertical and departed horizontal. Others survived surgery long enough to die later. Still others succumbed from using the quack remedies he sold via the radio. Dr. Morris Fishbein called Brinkley a quack, tried to put him out of business, but for many years failed in his quest. It was not until 1938 that the AMA journal published a series of articles exposing Brinkley's lack of authentic medical credentials and his medical escapades, which completely repudiated his career. After several lawsuits resulted in judgments against him, the once famous John R. Brinkley, who had performed over 16,000 goat gland transplants, became a poor and sick old man who died penniless in 1942.

Quackery Today

Brinkley and others like him are not just historical curiosities. There are still Brinkleys out there and we haven't gotten much better at stopping them. Today's snake-oil salesmen have an even easier time of it than did their predecessors. The promotion of nostrums and modern-day elixirs has become more sophisticated and gets to its audience much faster than ever before. The charlatan's message reaches

a broader audience in ways that old-time medicine men could never have imagined. Quacks today are better organized, better financed, and more persistent. Federal regulators assigned the task of controlling quackery admit to feeling overmatched by the increasing numbers of quacks and the growing skills that help quacks and charlatans avoid detection.

Current-day promoters of nostrums and elixirs have become expert in the use of media. A casual look at TV, the daily newspaper, a favorite magazine, and even the mail will reveal an astounding number of advertisements for health aids, panaceas, and devices that will make you healthier and happier. Think: infomercials, late-night hucksters, and ordinary TV or radio commercials aired both day and night. Perhaps the greatest boost to the marketers of scientifically unsubstantiated health products has been the Internet. More than 20 million people look to the Internet for health advice and recommendations, 70 percent of these even before visiting a doctor.

Quackery today is big business ... and growing. Recent reports tell us that patients spend upwards of \$30 billion every year looking for the next miracle cure, about the same amount spent as out-of-pocket expenditures for traditional doctors. Many in the public believe that if it's on the Internet, it must be true. But it isn't. Be aware: the media that promote these nostrums do not review their advertisements for either truth or accuracy. Although some over-the-counter drugs are subject to a review process, dietary supplements, weight-loss products, and sports "foods" including energy drinks are not subject to review or to government testing prior to being marketed.

Many of today's quacks and charlatans, entrepreneurs of the first rank, choose to call themselves "practitioners of alternative medicine." Sad to say, this term has created misunderstandings and has made it difficult to separate current-day quacks from genuine experimental and leading-edge researchers.

Fortunately, regulations affecting hospitals and surgeons have greatly limited the numbers of surgical quacks, so fewer claims of surgical cure-alls are being made. Exceptions exist. Some spinal surgeons, cancer quacks, and plastic surgeons guarantee quick, painless and successful treatment outcomes for diseases notoriously resistant to established treatments. Others offer miraculous outcomes for those looking for eternal youth or for an antidote to the aging process.

Targets for Quacks

Who among us are most vulnerable to the appeal of the quack? Older adults who are likely to be more subject to illness than the young; the health conscious; the beauty conscious; and those with chronic illnesses. Patients with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, cancer, and arthritis are also likely targets for fraud.

But most of us are susceptible to charlatans ... and for disparate reasons: those in failing health, in pain and desperate for relief; those who have not responded well to traditional treatments; those who have been given end-state diagnoses by orthodox medical practitioners. Unfortunately, for those seeking non-traditional treatment, too many of these avenues can lead to quacks and charlatans.

But not all non-traditional treatments lead to tragedy. In some cases, the nostrum seems to work. The patient gets better. He credits the charlatan who dispensed the pill, the elixir, the ointment, or the device, even though the product had not been scientifically tested nor validated for efficacy.

How could the patient believe he was cured by the elixir or the nostrum? How could that have happened? The charlatan understands very well, but the patient does not. The charlatan understands that most diseases are self-limiting; they simply run their course. In other situations, the placebo effect is at work, a phenomenon powerful enough to generate a real biologic response even though the nostrum taken has no medical value.

The 21st Century

Which brings the story up to the present, to today. We admire entrepreneurs, especially those who can bring their ideas to the marketplace and make a fortune in the process. Think Silicon Valley. With a good idea, a bit of larceny in their hearts, and an understanding of human frailties, entrepreneurs can succeed very well. Add to that the backing of a skilled marketing team and venture capital to underwrite their efforts, today's medical charlatans and quacks are writing a whole new chapter in an age-old story. They well understand that the media today welcomes the advertising dollar but does not vet health products for scientific integrity, let alone efficacy. The medicine man of old has become the corporate scammer of today. Caveat emptor!

So what's hot on today's list of medical scams? Here's a short list: weight-loss and workout supplements; dietary supplements; sleep-inducing products; pain relievers; homeopathic nostrums; and chiropractic, among others. The medical literature is rife with studies that address current health fads such as these.

Fish oil pills and liquids rich in Omega 3, promoted as an aid to heart health, have been shown to provide little to no protection against heart disease. Yet fish oil in pharmaceutical form brings in billions of dollars in revenue each year.

Many weight loss and workout supplements have been shown to contain a chemical nearly identical to amphetamine. But the routine use of amphetamines are well known to compromise good health. Because of this, Canadian authorities have removed supplements incorporating these chemicals from store shelves.

Tests performed on top-selling brands of herbal supplements have revealed that four out of five of the products tested contained none of the herbs described on their labels. The Attorney General of the State of New York has accused GNC, Target, Walgreens, and Wal-Mart of selling these fraudulent and potentially dangerous herbal supplements, and has directly informed the public of his findings.

The American public has become entranced by TV promoters of medical nostrums, elixers and devices, many of whom are physicians, now made rich and famous as a result of hawking questionable 'medicines'. According to studies published in the *British Medical Journal*, at least half of television's famous Dr. Oz's medical advice is either baseless or wrong. Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas became a pitchman for a bogus diabetes remedy. There are reports the Governor supplied his mailing list to charlatans peddling Biblical scripture as a cure for cancer. It has been said that he has since backed away from these efforts after a public backlash.

The American public has become rightfully confused by the many conflicting claims promoted by today's charlatans, quacks, and mountebanks. As a result, even carefully obtained, highly reputable scientific knowledge has become suspect. Doubters have declared war upon the consensus of experts, relying on their own lay interpretations of published scientific research, confirmed by their own experiences, as they see it.

A good example is that of a vocal segment of the public who today oppose the medical community's strong advocacy of vaccinations for children. The medical profession knows from its vast experience gathered over many years that vaccination is a remarkably effective way to protect people, especially children, from disease. However, groups of affluent parents, many of whom live in California, have opted to exempt their own children from all vaccinations, citing as their reason their "personal beliefs" in the scientifically discredited theory that vaccines lead to autism. A recent outbreak of measles in California which developed among the unvaccinated children of these same affluent parents could easily have been avoided had the parents permitted standard and timely vaccinations. The net effect has become a public health nightmare

In Conclusion

If there is a common thread, a shared story, that connects medical quacks and charlatans throughout the ages, it is one of avarice, acquisitiveness, and greed. Quacks have survived in all political systems, despite government attempts at regulation as well as condemnation by the establishment physicians of the day. Quackery is rarely static and readily adapts itself to new technologies, new drugs, new techniques, and, importantly, to new theories of sales and marketing. Medical charlatans are expert in engaging current media, and continue to command an ever-increasing chunk of the nation's disposable dollars.

We can almost guarantee that medical quacks, charlatans, and mountebanks will continue to thrive in America, the perfect environment for gifted entrepreneurs.

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