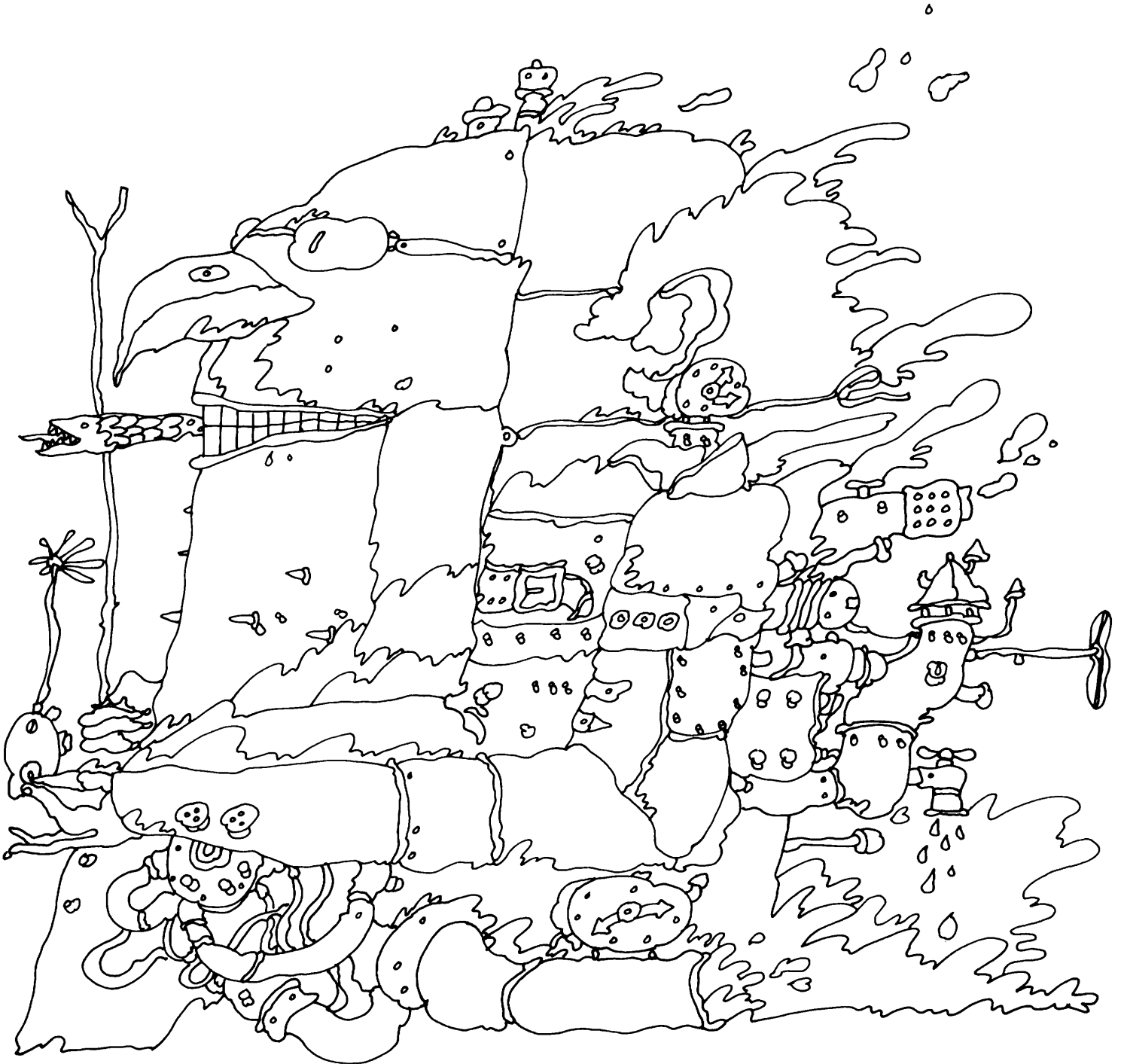


Health Frauds And Quackery

Stephen Barrett, M.D., a practicing psychiatrist in Allentown, Pennsylvania, has devoted considerable time to investigating and opposing quackery. Since 1970 he has been chairman of the board of directors of the Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud, Inc. He is also co-editor of the THE HEALTH ROBBERS—HOW TO PROTECT YOUR MONEY AND YOUR LIFE, a book on quackery written by physicians, nutritionists, journalists, and health educators. In this interview with Wayne L. Pines, FDA's deputy assistant commissioner for public affairs, Dr. Barrett explains how he views health fraud and quackery today. This is part of a continuing series of interviews with people outside FDA in an effort to stimulate discussion on important matters of public interest and concern.



Q. *Dr. Barrett, you've been investigating quackery in this country for seven years. How serious is the problem?*

A. Very serious. Few people realize how often or how skillfully they are being cheated in health matters. There aren't any exact figures, but my guess is that Americans are wasting between five and ten billion dollars a year on questionable "health" practices. And public confusion about many health matters is increasing.

Q. *To what do you attribute this increase?*

A. Publicity. Promoters of quackery have mastered the art of manipulating the media. Most people think that health claims must be true or somehow they "wouldn't be allowed." But the fact is that a false claim is against the law only if it appears in an advertisement or on a product label or is made in connection with a sale.

Nowadays very few health products carry false claims on their labels. They don't have to because the public is being flooded with false claims in news articles, in books, and on radio and TV talk shows. For example, take the claims that vitamin E will prevent heart disease and increase sexual performance. These claims would be illegal in an ad or on the label of a bottle of vitamin E pills. But if the bottle is simply labeled "vitamin E," and someone buys it because he heard somewhere that it might help him, no law has been broken. In effect, the media have become the label.

Q. *What are some of the more common health frauds?*

A. Cancer and arthritis fakes, fad diets, acupuncture, "organic" foods, phony gadgets, hair analysis, manhood fakes, bust developers, chiropractic adjustments, shots to "pep you up," nonprescription drugs which contain no effective ingredients. The list is endless.

Nutrition is a particularly fertile field for quackery. Perhaps half the people in this country are taking vitamins and other food supplements which they

don't need. Some think that extra vitamins can give them extra energy or can prevent or cure many diseases. Some think that they will achieve some sort of "superhealth." But most are worried that they might not be getting enough vitamins or other nutrients in their food. The fact is that nutrients are very plentiful in our food, and extra nutrients don't do anything for people. Taking more than you need is a waste of money.

Q. *What about fad diets?*

A. In the area of weight reduction, it seems there's a new and revolutionary diet coming out every few months. They sell a lot of books but the simple fact is that the only really sensible way to lose weight is to eat a balanced diet that contains fewer calories than you burn off. I wish we could find a way to decrease the amount of inaccurate information about health that gets into the media.

Q. *You've been quoted as saying that the answer to quackery in general lies in increased public education, as well as in passing laws.*

A. Yes, but that is more easily said than done. Anyone who tries to promote either one will run into stiff political opposition. For example, a few years ago the FDA tried to issue new standards for vitamin and mineral supplements so that people would get products that are formulated better, and so that certain misleading claims being made by sellers of food supplements would be stopped. The health food industry responded by generating more than two million letters to Congress and actually got a law passed to block some of the things the FDA wanted to do to protect people from being cheated. We see a similar effort being made today by proponents of Laetrile.

Q. *There is great concern today about the role of Government in protecting people. How far do you think Government should go to protect people from being cheated in health matters?*

A. My feeling is that Government action must be very vigorous. But in actual practice, that's not so simple. People don't know whom to trust anymore. Just because a Government agency says something is dangerous or doesn't work does not mean that people will believe it. To me, quackery is a form of stealing. But many of quackery's victims don't see themselves as victims. They don't believe they are being cheated and would like the Government to leave them alone. Laetrile promoters have been taking advantage of these anti-Government feelings.

Q. *Would you consider Laetrile to be the major health fraud in this country today?*

A. I'd say so. Many people are dying as a result of taking Laetrile instead of getting proper treatment for cancer in its early stages. But widespread publicity about people who think Laetrile has helped them has stirred up hopes among cancer victims and their families. Many people want to try it and State legislators are being pressured to "legalize" it.

Q. *What makes people so willing to try products like Laetrile which don't work?*

A. The modern quack has learned to reach people emotionally on the level that counts the most. What sells is not the quality of his product but his ability to influence his audience. It is not difficult to sell hope to people who feel desperate.

Q. *To what extent are doctors involved with quackery?*

A. A number of doctors have weird ideas about nutrition or make diagnoses of hypoglycemia, adrenal insufficiency, or subclinical hypothyroidism on all or most of their patients. Often they will diagnose these glandular disorders without laboratory tests to back them up. These doctors seem to have abandoned scientific thought, particularly in the area of body chemistry. There aren't very many of them—probably fewer than one in a hundred—but they present a

special problem. Because they hold licenses to practice, people expect them to know what they are doing.

There is a larger group of licensed practitioners whose practice is unscientific—chiropractors. They base their practice on a false theory, that all diseases are the result of spinal difficulties. Chiropractors sometimes help people, but their training is poor and I generally recommend that people avoid them.

Q. *What makes people develop confidence in the types of doctors you would consider unscientific?*

A. That's a good question, but a very complicated one to answer. Most ailments are self-limiting, which means they will improve with no treatment at all. Good doctors rarely take credit for what nature does, but unscientific practitioners usually do. We've all seen people who swear by a doctor or treatment method. I don't like to see that intense a feeling because it usually means the patient is far too dependent. Another factor that helps unscientific practitioners build their following is the placebo effect, that is, if a person thinks he has been helped by something, he may feel relief from his pain or other discomfort. A common example of the placebo effect is that most people feel better when the doctor walks into the room.

Q. *What about acupuncture?*

A. When acupuncture hit the headlines a few years ago, many people hoped that some kind of medical magic was about to be rediscovered. But most of them have had their hopes come crashing down.

Q. *Would you say that acupuncture never helps anyone?*

A. It's hard to make a generalization of that type. Cramped muscles sometimes relax when they are stuck with needles, so some people might get temporary relief in that way. No doubt some people who go to acupuncturists will experience a placebo effect. But there is no reason to believe that acupuncture can change

the course of any organic disease—like arthritis, for example.

Q. *You mention the placebo effect again. Don't doctors use a lot of placebos in the form of sugar pills, dummy pills, and the like? Don't doctors also recommend vitamins to many people who don't really need them?*

A. Yes, they do. Doctors are confronted by many people who complain of tiredness or a variety of vague symptoms which are reactions to nervous tension. Far too often, instead of finding out what is bothering them, doctors tell these people to take a tonic, a vitamin, or some other type of placebo.

Q. *If a placebo makes someone feel better, what's wrong with that?*

A. I am against people being misled. The quack who relies on a placebo effect is also pretending he knows what he is doing—that he can tell what is wrong with you and that he has effective treatment for just about everything. His customers are playing Russian roulette. The medical doctor who uses vitamins as placebos may not be as dangerous, but he is encouraging people to form lifelong habits of using things they don't need. In addition, patients who are not satisfied with this approach may reach toward alternate ways of getting attention—like going to chiropractors or treating themselves with food fads.

Q. *So on balance you feel rather negatively about placebos and the way they are used.*

A. Yes. Most people who use placebos do not get relief from them. So we're talking about practices that are not only misleading. They are also a financial rip-off. There are certain medical situations where use of a placebo is justified, but these are rare.

Q. *Do you find that most promoters of quackery have a financial motive?*

A. Some seem to be motivated by greed alone, some seem to have a sincere belief in what they are

promoting, and some seem to have a mixture of both. For example, sellers of manhood devices, bust developers, and many other types of worthless mail-order gadgets know that they are peddling fakes. They are "hit-and-run" artists who open a post office box and hope to make enough money before the Postal Inspector shuts down their business. On the other hand, most people involved in nutrition quackery strike me as sincere believers. They may make money, but they also appear to be hopelessly confused.

The "true believers" are the ones who cause us the most grief because of their tendency to get involved in intense political activity—like the promotion of Laetrile.

Q. *Laetrile has been around for more than 25 years. How do you account for its sudden burst into the political arena?*

A. The intensity of the political force is due to the fact that users rather than sellers appear to be the ones spearheading the drive to legalize its sale. The approach of turning victims into political foot soldiers is not new, but with Laetrile it has reached a new level of intensity.

Q. *So what looks to legislators like a grassroots movement is being orchestrated by people with vested financial interests?*

A. Yes. There are at least four national groups. The oldest, founded in 1955, is the National Health Federation. Since it began, NHF has been led mostly by people who have a financial interest in promoting questionable "health" products or ideas. Ten of them have been in legal difficulty for making false claims and four of them have even received prison sentences. The primary goal of NHF appears to be to weaken Government interference with quackery. Its major activities include lawsuits and letter-writing campaigns like the one that stopped the FDA vitamin regulations.

At least three other national groups are devoted to pushing the gamut of worthless cancer cures. One was founded in 1963 by a woman who

thought she had been cured of breast cancer by Laetrile but who died of the disease in 1969. Another is led by a woman who is a major distributor of food supplements. A third group, said to be the largest, is led by some of the major distributors of Laetrile who have been convicted of smuggling.

Q. *Your book goes into the politics of quackery in considerable detail. What role do you see for FDA in this fight?*

A. I am deeply concerned about the growing political power of those who are out to destroy Government protection of consumers against health frauds. Right now it is against the law to market drugs and devices that are dangerous or don't work. The FDA protects us against quackery mainly by forcing such products off the market. There are occasional criminal prosecutions and I hope frankly that there will be more. They are difficult and the courts have not usually sent people convicted of health frauds to prison. But the way I look at it is that misleading someone in a health matter may be a threat to his life—and that deserves a very stiff penalty.

Q. *What got you interested in fighting quackery?*

A. I've always hated to see people get hurt or cheated. In 1968 I happened to read two books about health frauds which made me angry enough to try and do something about them. It wasn't hard to find others in my community who shared this concern and were willing to join forces. We formed a nonprofit corporation in 1970 and later joined the Consumer Federation of America.

Q. *What does your committee actually do?*

A. Mostly we serve as an information clearinghouse—gathering and distributing information about health frauds. We look for deceptive ads about health products and report them. We involve ourselves in many legislative matters and testify at Gov-

ernment hearings. We invite people who have been cheated to complain to us. We also furnish speakers.

Q. *I understand you are also quite active in promoting water fluoridation.*

A. Yes. As you know, when a community adjusts the fluoride concentration of its water supply to about one part per million of water, its children will get fewer cavities in their teeth. Unfortunately, there is an organized effort under way to scare people into thinking that fluoridation is dangerous. The National Health Federation, one of the groups I just mentioned that promotes Laetrile, has also been very active in attacking fluoridation. For about two years NHF has been claiming that fluoride causes cancer. It doesn't, of course, but this type of publicity can succeed in frightening people. What makes this situation so sad is that the victims of antifluoridation quackery are innocent children who are unable to defend themselves.

Q. *It sounds like your definition of quackery is quite broad.*

A. Yes. Our committee is interested in any aspect of health in which deception may be involved. Incidentally, one thing we do that's particularly satisfying is to help victims who see the light and want to do something about it. This doesn't happen very often because even when people realize that they have been cheated, they are usually too embarrassed or afraid of "trouble" to do anything. We like to see victims fight back. Otherwise, whoever gyped them will go right on cheating others.

Unfortunately, the very word "quack" is very misleading because when most people think of a quack or quackery, they imagine some sort of outlandish person selling snake oil from the back of a covered wagon. Most modern forms of quackery look more respectable and are harder to recognize.

Q. *Can you give some general guidelines for spotting quacks?*

A. The outright medical quack can usually be recognized by his talk of secret or miracle cures, of a single device or system which can diagnose or treat all ailments, of Government or AMA "persecution," and of the "dangers" of drugs or surgery in general. He is also apt to use testimonials from supposedly satisfied customers.

The food quack can usually be recognized by his claims that everybody should use food supplements or that many diseases can be cured or prevented by large doses of vitamins.

More subtle forms of quackery can often be avoided by an attitude of skepticism toward all forms of "health" products which are advertised to the public, particularly those sold by mail. Doctors who give shots to almost all their patients should be avoided.

Q. *Where can people get reliable health information?*

A. Most medical doctors who regularly write columns for newspapers and general magazines are reliable. Some of them publish newsletters and books as well. For in-depth reporting, nothing can beat the health articles in CONSUMER REPORTS. FAMILY HEALTH magazine has good articles too, but occasionally will publish a misleading ad. Publications loaded with food supplement ads should be completely disregarded. About half of the books about health in the average bookstore and almost all of the ones in health food stores are filled with nonsense. News reports of all types tend to be overly sensational and therefore confusing. Regularly scheduled medical TV talk shows whose guests are mostly medical doctors are reliable. But some guests on the entertainment type talk shows are leading promoters of quackery.

For more individual attention, a good relationship with a doctor who can take the time to answer your questions can be a big help. Dietitians can be a good source of nutrition advice. Our book also lists more than 100 organizations which can give reliable information.

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