

Bogus health & wellness claims hurts weak and vulnerable in Canada

Contributed by Peter James
Saturday, 24 March 2007

Fraudulent health treatment claims are a growing concern in the marketplace. They target the most vulnerable consumers - the overweight and seriously ill. Beware of too-good-to-be-true advertisements promising "rapid" and "effortless" weight-loss or "miracle cures" and "newly discovered" treatments for disease and illness. Psychics also often prey on the sick or lonely, suggesting you have been cursed but can be cured if 'dirty' cash in your possession can be 'cleaned.' All these scams are designed to steal your money and worse may put your health at risk if proper medical treatment is delayed.

Quacks and psychics prey on sick, lonely and unhappy people

I love www.QuackWatch.org - an online guide to quackery, health fraud, and intelligent decisions. It's a great website detailing hundreds of different scams being run on unsuspecting consumers. It also helps Canadians and Americans get independent information about special areas of interest, including autism, chiropractic, dentistry, multilevel marketing, and many other hot topics.

The website is also closely affiliated with the National Council Against Health Fraud, which cosponsors a free weekly newsletter.

The same adage is true of health or psychic claims - if it sounds too good to be true, it is! In fact, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.

On other hand, many quacks using lots of anecdotal testimonies to cover the lack of sound scientific studies. It seems that extraordinary claims often lack even ordinary proof of their success.

All promoters love slogans and buzzwords. During the 1970s, the word "natural" was the magic bullet. During the 1980s, the word "holistic" gained popularity. Today's leading buzzword is "alternative." In fact, cash-strapped governments are spending millions of our dollars on "alternative" health methodologies that have little or no scientific acceptance.

Instead, "alternative" promoters reaching people emotionally. What sells is not the quality of their products, but the ability to influence their audience. Their basic strategies are to promise the moon and knock the "competition." To one and all, they promise better health and a longer life. They offer solutions for virtually every health problem, including some they have invented.

Medical doctors Stephen Barrett and Victor Herbert outline their concerns about bogus health and wellness claims: "To those in pain, they promise relief. To the incurable, they offer hope. To the nutrition-conscious, they say, 'Make sure you have enough.' To a public worried about pollution, they say, 'Buy natural.' For ailments amenable to

scientific health care, they offer 'safer nontoxic alternatives.' And they have an arsenal of ploys for defending themselves against criticism.

"No side effects."

The two doctors note that "alternative" methods are often described as safer, gentler, and/or without side effects. If this were true -- and often it is not - the quack's "remedy" would be too weak to have any effect. Any medication potent enough to help people will be potent enough to cause side effects. FDA approval requires evidence that the likelihood of benefit far exceeds the probable harm.

"We attack the cause of disease."

Quacks claim that whatever they do will not only cure the ailment but will also prevent future trouble. This claim is false. Illness can result from many factors, both internal and external, some of which have been identified and some of which are unknown. Scientific medical care can prevent certain diseases and reduce the odds of getting various others.

"Think for yourself."

Quacks urge people to disregard scientific evidence (which they cannot produce) in favor of personal experience (theirs or yours). But personal experience is not the best way to determine whether a method works. When someone feels better after having used a product or procedure, it is natural to give credit to whatever was done. Most ailments are self-limiting, and even incurable conditions can have sufficient day-to-day variation to enable quack methods to gain large followings.

In addition, taking action often produces temporary relief of symptoms (a placebo effect). For these reasons, scientific experimentation is almost always necessary to establish whether health methods are really effective. Individual experience rarely provides a basis for separating cause-and-effect from coincidence.

Nor can the odds of a treatment working be determined without following participants in a well-designed study and tabulating failures as well as successes -- something quacks don't do.

"What have you got to lose?"

Quacks would like you to believe that their methods are harmless and therefore there is nothing to lose by trying them. With vitamins taken as "nutrition insurance," for example, many people feel as though they are making a bet with very little to lose and a great deal to gain. If a method doesn't work, do the odds of it causing physical harm really matter? Moreover, some quack methods are directly harmful; others harm by diverting people from proven methods. All waste people's time and/or money ... and who wants to be cheated out of either precious commodity.

Quick Tip: Before buying any treatment or medication, consult your physician, pharmacist or other health care professional. Any product that has weight-loss properties must have a Drug Identification Number. Confirm its authenticity by contacting Health Canada at 1-866-225-0709 or visit www.hc-sc.gc.ca. Report any bogus health and wellness claims to the Competition Bureau of Canada at 1-800-348-5358 or at www.competitionbureau.gc.ca.

Fortune tellers also prey on the weak and vulnerable.

It was a classic psychic scheme to defraud her client out of \$200,000 in inheritance money as detailed by another great website: Crimes-of-Persuasion.com. The gypsy claimed that this new-found wealth was evil and had to be cleansed through a series of rituals.

Over the course of two months, the victim was conned into handing over \$160,000 in cash and another \$40,000 in jewellery and gift certificates.

The con had begun with a simple \$15 tarot reading at a restaurant. It ended when the psychic disappeared with all the 'cleansed' cash and gems.

For people who think these type of psychic scams are essentially harmless, the victim strongly disagrees: "What she did to me scarred me spiritually and emotionally. She brought demons and devils into my life and said they would kill me and my son. The money is one thing, but when it comes to putting a curse on my son, threatening him, there is no penalty that could cover that."

Another woman, who said she gave a fortune teller \$76,000 when she was going through a deep emotional crisis stated. "She took advantage of me when I was really having problems and feeling suicidal."

Bogus health and wellness claims along with psychic allegations fall into the same category of scams: The harm done is deep and lasting, not only health-wise and financially but emotionally. Before you lay out your hard-earned money for unproved 'alternatives' proffered by quacks and psychics trust the real remedies offered by proven science. Save your time and money.

Next article focuses unscrupulous used car sales practices.