REAL OR NOT?

Health Scams and Beauty Fallacies Exposed

This page is intentionally left blank

REAL OR NOT?

Health Scams and Beauty Fallacies Exposed

Andy Ho, PhD

*The Straits Times
Singapore*

World Scientific

DL Publishing

Published by

DL Publishing, an imprint of

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

5 Toh Tuck Link, Singapore 596224

USA office: 27 Warren Street, Suite 401-402, Hackensack, NJ 07601

UK office: 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ho, Andy, Ph.D.

Real or not : health scams and beauty fallacies exposed / by Andy Ho.
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 981-256-277-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Quacks and quackery. 2. Medical misconceptions. 3. Medical care--
Corrupt practices. 4. Cosmetics industry--Corrupt practices. 5.
Pharmaceutical industry--Corrupt practices. 6. Deceptive advertising.
7. Fraud. I. Title.

R730.H597 2005

615.8'56--dc22

2005041837

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The articles in this book were first published in *The Straits Times* between 2003 and 2004.

Copyright © 2005 by World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without written permission from the Publisher.

For photocopying of material in this volume, please pay a copying fee through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, USA. In this case permission to photocopy is not required from the publisher.

Typeset by Stallion Press

Email: enquiries@stallionpress.com

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press

This volume is dedicated to my wife, Josephine,
my son, Ken, and my daughter, Jean.

This page is intentionally left blank

Preface

WILL that really make my breasts larger? Can lasers actually make my skin younger? Which is better for me, Viagra or Cialis? What do you mean my liver enzymes are high, Doctor? Should I drink red wine to keep my ticker healthy? Should I take that neurolinguistic programming class to improve my performance at work? How low should be my cholesterol?

If you or your significant other — wife/husband, girlfriend/boyfriend — has ever asked these questions and others, I think you will appreciate a well-researched answer from someone other than your doctor who may, anyway, be too busy with his daily grind to keep up with any literature. It was with this in mind that I began writing a Saturday column called “Science Monitor” for *The Straits Times*, Singapore’s main daily, focussing on various health scams, fantasies and fallacies that have begun plaguing consumers in Asia. They were always crafted in response to new medical developments reported in the media or triggered off

by interesting questions posed by my readers who often call in or e-mail me.

This book is a compilation of some of my more recent columns. I have grouped 40 of them into five chapters. In addition, I have written an essay especially for this book, one on anal sex, a matter one prudish night editor at *The Straits Times* considered too scatological to publish in a family newspaper — as if families did not originate from sex in the broadest sense.

But I think it is an important issue to address which the mainstream press, whether in Asia or even in the West, has become too politically correct when it comes to gay or HIV issues that it can't address them honestly and truthfully. If you have a gay son or colleague, the facts I lay out in this essay may well save his life.

I wrote the essay precisely because that dishonesty is symptomatic of much in the press which has engendered a not-unjustified decline in trust for journalists, which has only been matched by a similarly growing mistrust of physicians and Western medicine.

Even as the science of medicine advances, the general public's confidence in them has seriously down-trended in recent years. Correlatively, this has given rise to a widespread interest and unexamined trust in alternative medicine, so-called.

But this means the popularity of much that is really quackery and the unjustified but widespread confidence in herbal concoctions and nutritional supplements have given the unscrupulous scammer many a market opportunity.

Many of us are fools when it comes to these things and, as the old saw goes, a fool and his money are soon parted. In this case, however, the scams foisted on us could harm us, health-wise.

I decided to compile these columns together as a handy little book to provide for you a review of what cutting-edge research says about these scams. You can apply the insights culled from the best studies about health claims of various alternative therapies that I have reviewed painstakingly and discussed with the best scientists and doctors. Rest assured, dubious medical practices that trained health-care professionals including physicians are not spared either.

Above all, I urge readers to do what I have done: Research any claim for your money that says it can make you healthier, happier or hipper, all without the deleterious side effects of your doctor's prescription. Begin your search with a huge dollop of salt in each case and you will soon learn to ferret out the truth for yourself.

Organise the pros and cons.

Then decide for yourself.

But remember also to keep an open mind.

You might be surprised, as I have been, by what you find after a duly diligent search.

But, most of all, trust your own research.

It only remains for me to thank my family for putting up with my spending innumerable hours poring over medical journals or spending time on the phone late into the night talking to physicians and scientists who practise in other time zones and who are always gracious with their time when I call to discuss their research.

Andy Ho, PhD (M.I.T.)

Singapore

2005

Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	xv
Chapter I: Shy about sexy matters?	
Boob creams and pills are just a bust	3
Looks like it's bra-burning time	8
In search of manhood boost? Here're some phallic fallacies	17
Sexual blues in three colours	21
Bye to hormones and back to herbs for hot flushes?	26
Prostates and a sea of pain	31
Why anal sex really sucks . . .	35
Chapter II: Forever young and trim?	
Beauty pills — How to distinguish help from hype	43
A ray of hope for skin blemishes	49
Hair today, gone tomorrow . . . but science can help	54

Of grey hair, dyes, risks and hope	58
Eating less to live longer?	63
Atkins, a dieting delusion?	69
Best carb blocker? Look in the mirror	74
Before you try rolling away your cellulite . . .	79

Chapter III: Is that really a cure?

More muck than magic in a colon flush	87
Coffee cure for cancer? Add a pinch of caution	94
Cure for cancer? Don't start drinking urine yet	98
Flushing out clogged arteries	103
Chemical "claw" the answer to clogged arteries?	108
Take heart, red wine still best for coronary health	112
A "shock machine" at home may just save that life	116
An "oil" for arthritis?	121
Right to ban <i>ma huang</i> supplements	126
Spirulina — Pond scum or wonder food? Jury's out	131
Why green may not be everyone's cup of tea	136

Chapter IV: You're sure, Doc?

Doctor, can I really trust you?	143
Taking statins to be safe? You may be sorry	148

Contents

“Pre-disease” — Has medicine gone mad?	156
Your liver enzymes look high?	160
Do we really need full annual health checks?	164
Don’t ignore that frequent heartburn	169
Neurolinguistic programming and brainwashing	173
 Chapter V: What’s that in my food?	
Eat French fries at your own risk ...	181
Palm oil bad? Get those fat facts right	186
Watch that margarine	190
Having sushi? Hold the salmon	195
That steak is mad-cow free? Bull!	199
Mad cow disease in that vitamin?	204
Coffee can be good for you	211
Should you stick with non-stick Teflon pans?	215
Microwave ovens are safe, just keep the eggs away	220
 Index	 225

This page is intentionally left blank

Introduction

IN July 2004, a British surgeon ticked off Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, for promoting the likes of Gerson Therapy — coffee enemas and carrot juice — for terminal cancer. And quite rightly too. In an open letter to the *British Medical Journal*, Dr Michael Baum, professor emeritus of surgery at University College London, thundered: “Your power and authority rest on an accident of birth. I don’t begrudge you that authority, but I do beg you to exercise your power with extreme caution when advising patients with life-threatening diseases to embrace unproven therapies . . . With respect, Your Highness, you’ve got it wrong”. Wrong because untested and uncontested.

Of course, no one is contesting that herbs may contain useful compounds. After all, doctors have long used digoxin extracted from foxglove to treat heart failure, quinine from the cinchona bark for malaria, and vincristine from rosy periwinkle for leukaemia, and so on. What must be contested, however, is the unquestioning faith in anything calling itself “herbal”.

If you want to be sure the herbal concoction you are taking is, firstly, safe and, secondly, efficacious for your condition, there is only one gold standard: All herbs must be subjected to randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials. Any unorthodox therapy will cease to be “alternative” if it meets these strict evidence-based requirements. But if you can’t, please hold your peace.

In such drug trials, some test subjects are given the treatment while others are given a look-alike placebo. Neither researcher nor participant knows who has been given what until the study ends — thus both are blinded. Who is assigned to treatment or placebo is done randomly, perhaps by a coin flip — hence, randomised.

Of course, many advocates of alternative medicine have insisted that this gold standard of drug research isn’t quite their cup of tea. For them, tradition, anecdotal evidence and user testimonial should suffice. After all, if a treatment helps me or my grandmother, it must be effective.

If not, it doesn’t work.

Simple enough?

Unfortunately, common sense observations like these aren’t reliable in medical conditions, and double-blind studies have repeatedly proven this to be the case. This is because observations can be confounded by biases, placebo effects and pure chance.

Without fair tests, we may risk accepting useless or harmful treatments as helpful and safe, or dismissing actually effective treatments as useless. This is all the more true with “traditional” cures, for a few other reasons.

First, it is not every day that drugs produce distinct and dramatic effects like opium for pain or chloroform for anaesthesia. Where there are no such dramatic effects, especially with herbs, more formal comparisons are needed to assess their effects.

Second, herbal cures can be harmful. Some herbs can cause DNA damage but the effects may be seen only in later generations. For example, naturopaths advise arthritis patients to take almonds and sunflower seeds that are very rich in omega-6-polyunsaturated fatty acids. But these can actually aggravate the inflammation.

Third, common sense seems to fly out of the window whenever the phrase complementary/alternative/traditional medicine gets up on its hind legs. It is, quite simply, a very emotive issue. To detractors, it means quackery, pure and simple, never mind that peppermint can alleviate symptoms in irritable bowel syndrome. To supporters, it spells natural, safe and painless, never mind that St John’s wort, a herb taken for mild depression, reacts dangerously with warfarin, a blood thinner. If this leads to underdosing of warfarin, a blood clot

could occur; if it leads to overdosing of warfarin, serious bleeding could ensue.

To overcome this partisanship, all alternative therapies must be tested fairly. Insisting that even the most ardently believed folk remedy be subjected to the most rigorous of tests isn't being anti-tradition. It is simply doing good science, there being neither Western nor Eastern science, just good or bad science. On a practical note, doctors must face up to the reality that what was once weird and wacky is increasingly seen as acceptable, even cool. Many may be taking alternative medicines but aren't telling their doctors, who aren't bothering to ask.

To the doctor: This is an explosive mix. Physicians must no longer irresponsibly bury their heads in the sand and exclude a whole strain of health care — legitimate or otherwise — as if it has nothing to do with them and their patients. Yes, they didn't learn about such things in medical school but most alternative medications remain untested and unresearched, so they make for potentially dangerous situations. Doctors must support and keep up with the scientific study of herbal medicines.

To the consumer: You owe yourself and your family the duty of finding out as much as you can about alternative therapies that clamour for your time, money and health. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.