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HARMLESS, BUT INEFFECTIVE, REMEDIES

Once they disappear, problems are quickly forgotten. If they are not completely forgotten, certainly our once strong feelings concerning their seriousness are greatly dulled and dampened.

Communicable diseases constitute a classic example of this changing pattern of interest on the part of society. Another striking example is that of quack medicines.

It is only within the last few years that we have reached the point that physicians, pharmacists, and patients could rely upon drug products to be effective for the uses, conditions, and treatments claimed for them in their labeling and advertising. But it was not always so.

A century ago, quackery was blatant, with medicine men traveling by horse-drawn wagons across the country hawking the latest concoction. These "cure-alls" generally either tasted terrible or were heavily laced with alcohol. Neither of these considerations made the product harmful but added considerably to the perceived effectiveness—what we today refer to as the "placebo" factor.

Quackery became more sophisticated during the last generation or so—but there still was a lively market for liver pills, Hadacol, honey and vinegar, copper bracelets, electronic devices, and a myriad of other products of highly dubious therapeutic value.

The medical and pharmacy professions campaigned vigorously in an effort to stamp out such quackery, but it wasn't until the Kefauver–Harris Drug Amendments of 1962 were enacted that the Food and Drug Administration finally had an effective weapon to employ in the battle to rid the market of such products. This was because the 1962 amendments, for the first time, required that an article must be demonstrated as *effective* if it is to be promoted as having some therapeutic or medicinal usefulness.

The quack medicines were generally all harmless and nontoxic; safety *per se* was not a problem. However, the health professions—and the public through their elected representatives—decided this was not enough. If a drug is to be on the market, it must have more than just a placebo effect. Skilled health care practitioners must be able to rely upon their therapeutic tools. Moreover, the public must not be bilked by slick con-artists who are eager to take advantage of the hopes and desperation of sick persons and their families by selling useless products for hard-earned money.

If public protection is needed by any group, it is the victims of cancer, arthritis, and similar diseases where hope is little and despair is great. It is this unfortunate group which is most vulnerable to the siren-song of the quacks.

Normally we think of the *New York Times* as a model newspaper in that its editorial views and opinions are well-considered and show care and judgment in their formulation. We were disappointed, therefore, by an editorial appearing this summer entitled "Illegal Laetrile."

The *Times* editorial correctly explained that current law prohibits the marketing of any new drug until it is proven to be both effective and safe. The editorial further explained that there appears to be no concern regarding the safety of laetrile (amygdalin), but that no evidence has been presented to FDA that the drug is useful in the treatment of cancer. In fact, the editorial admits that even animal experiments have been almost uniformly negative except for some curious initial results at one institution which that same institution now regards as spurious.

The *Times* then concludes by saying: *"While laetrile may in fact be totally ineffective against cancer, it apparently is harmless; and so long as it is prohibited by law, it will have an inevitable fascination for those who have no other hope. It cannot injure those unfortunates; it might help them, at least psychologically. Why should the law deny them such help?"*

In our view, the same argument can be made—and in many cases, has been made—for every quack medicine ever offered to the public. Indeed, some of these at least had some indication of value, if not proven evidence. Based upon present information, there is no more justification for the FDA to permit the marketing of laetrile than there would be for FDA to permit the bottling of sugar water by some huckster who would then sell it at a fancy price as a guaranteed safe cancer cure!

Edward G. Feldmann