

# CAHF

Campaign Against Health Fraud

newsletter

## Why a campaign against health fraud?

### Editorial

Recent years have seen a flood of explanations and promised cures for illness whose validity has never been tested; vitamins to increase intelligence, hair analysis which reveals vital missing minerals, diets that promise to counteract childhood hyperactivity or prevent cancer.

According to TV presenter Nick Ross the public are being deceived: "People are at their most vulnerable when they are ill or depressed, and it is a particularly offensive form of fraud when people pose as healers and exploit that desperate need for help by offering them illusions of cure that can never be fulfilled".

The Campaign Against Health Fraud has been set up with the specific purpose of protecting the public by highlighting examples of fraudulent practice and providing a panel of experts to independently assess health claims.

Vincent Marks, Professor of Biochemistry at Surrey University and a founding member of the Campaign has helped expose health myths about hypoglycaemia and the role of hair analysis in diagnosing mineral deficiencies. "These bogus physical explanations for ill health: bring the genuine concepts of scientific medicine into disrepute" he says.

A medical writer and Honorary

Research Assistant at University College London, Caroline Richmond, points out that broadly unproven ideas about health and illness have found widespread acceptance, "the Campaign will give journalists and everyone in the media concerned with health access to an independent assessment of the many claims about health that are currently in circulation", she says.

Dr Peter Skrabenek, reader in Community Medicine at Trinity College Dublin argues "we need to put the interests of the public foremost and be honest about the extent of our ignorance of the causes of illness, and how they can be cured".

## The aims of the Campaign

The Campaign welcomes growing public concern about health. But it is worried about the growth of quackery and false pseudo-scientific claims which prey on this growing interest.

The campaign was formed by a group of individuals—doctors, other health professionals, scientists, lawyers, journalists and others—who felt that a group was needed to focus this concern.

The Campaign aims to promote:

- Good practice in the assessment and testing of treatments whether 'orthodox' or 'alternative';
- Consumer protection in all forms of medicine and health care, both by thorough testing of products and procedures, and better regulation of all

practitioners;

- Better understanding by the public and the media that valid clinical trials are the best way of ensuring public protection.

The Campaign aims to oppose:

- Diagnoses that are misleading or false, or that may encourage unnecessary treatment for normal con-

ditions or non-existent diseases;

- The use and promotion of treatments that may be fraudulent, unnecessary, unduly dangerous, involved needless expense, or prevent patients from receiving the best care;
- The charging of patients for unproven procedures.

The campaign will act as resource for the media who want comments on health fraud. It will set up working parties to publish reports on specific issues. At least four are expected to begin in the next year. One on candida and 'the yeast syndrome' is already meeting.

In the future the campaign hopes to lobby for legislation to protect consumers for health fraud.

### CAHF Archivist

Quackbusters now has an archivist who is collecting our press cuttings for us. Please send all relevant cuttings—please do not assume we already have them—to Dr Eric Grogono, Sol Bracken, Warren Hill, Leiston Road, Alburgh, Suffolk IP15 5QA.

### Contents

#### Page 2

Small ads: monitoring health claims

What the papers don't say

#### Page 3

Pill scare: are vitamin manufacturers unnecessarily frightening women?

Hay fever drugs: 'non-sedating'

Natural danger: why a herb should be controlled

#### Page 4

The holistic question

Nutritional sense  
Concise guide to quackery

## Monitoring the promotion of health claims

**The Advertising Standards Authority provides one way of monitoring the extent to which companies promoting health products mislead the public. We present here a selection of their findings in recent months.**

A member of the public has successfully challenged false claims in an advertisement that a safety filter mask protected those 'at risk from dangerous fumes'. A complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority ruled against Manchester company Ambrose Wilson which has, it says, deleted the claim from all future advertisements.

An allergy clinic has been found to be falsely claiming links to a conventional hospital, contrary to instructions issued by the hospital. The Northwest Allergy (and Arthritis Clinics) claimed in an advertisement in *Here's Health* to have clinics at the Alexandra Hospital and the Lostock Beaumont Hospital near Manchester. It had never had use of the Alexandra hospital and a member of the public who complained to the ASA said they thought use of the Beaumont Hospital had ceased prior to publication of the advertisement. The clinic failed to respond satisfactorily to the complaint, the ASA said, and the authority urged *Here's Health* to ensure the accuracy of future advertisements.

The ASA has ruled against an advertisement for a weight loss programme. An advertisement from International Lifeplans said: 'THE ULTIMATE DIET . . . eat what you like and how you like and achieve your desired weight without pills or

any other restrictions.' A member of the public who complained said the only proven way to lose weight was to reduce calorie intake or increase exercise levels.

The ASA was concerned that the advertisement for a weight-loss programme had not been checked by publishers before publication as the ASA code requires. The advertisers were advised to seek advice from the Committee on Advertising Practice before preparing similar future advertisements.

'Male Factor 1000' was claimed to produce 'tremendous increase in energy and stamina, decreased recovery time following any physical exertion in work, sport and sex; you feel young with a noticeable increase in virility and vitality'. Manufacturers Herbalife (UK) Ltd said the claims in a leaflet were based on information received from customers, but failed to supply independent documentary evidence in support of the claims to the Advertising Standards Authority. The authority ruled that the claims be deleted from future advertisements.

A proprietary diet advertisement based on a single individual experience has been censured by the Advertising Standards Authority. The ASA upheld a claim against Royale Diet and local agent Mrs Wharmby of Oldham who placed an advertisement congratulating a Norma Ward from Shaw 'for losing 17 lbs in just two weeks' using the diet. The complainant had tried the diet and it had not had any effect.

The advertisers failed to provide substantiation that this claim was genuine and failed to respond in detail to the authority's enquiries. Advertisers should not use testimonial claims based on unrepresentative individual experiences, the authority ruled.

## What the papers don't say

### The other side of the story

#### No aliens?

From: Caroline Richmond  
To: Letters Editor  
Evening Standard

I was interested to read that headaches and paralysis are caused by electromagnetic rays. Even Dan Dare's mother never warned him about this. The suggestion that four cot deaths were also caused by invisible rays was, however, tasteless and can only cause distress to people recovering from the death of a child.

There was a time when the Evening Standard was a perfectly sane paper. After this, will we soon be reading that the editor has been kidnapped by little green men from Mars?

the following statement from Dr Stoppard:

*At no time did I wish to give the group of alternative practitioners medical credence; "detecting" is not the same as diagnosing or treating. Pedantically speaking, I should perhaps have said "claim to detect".*

#### No vitamin

From: Professor John Gurrow, Department of Human Nutrition, St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College

To: The Editor  
"Today"

The advice from "Nutrition Expert" Daniele de Winter is a mixture of sense and nonsense. Of course it is good to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, to get enough sleep and take regular exercise. But do not try to fool your readers about the benefits of "Vitamin F", which does not exist. Unfortunately amygdalin does exist and can be extracted from apricot kernels. You call it a "cancer beater" but it has never yet been shown to cure or prevent cancer, and it has poisoned some children. That smell of almonds it gives off is cyanide!

#### No credence

From: Dr Nick Beard

TV doctor Miriam Stoppard recently (TV Times, December 1988) wrote of reflexology that "well trained practitioners can . . . detect weakness or abnormality in distant parts of the body". After a reminder that she had not replied to my first letter requesting evidence to support this claim, I received

**Why not encourage your friends and colleagues to become members of the Campaign Against Health Fraud?**

**Those interested should apply to the campaign at:  
Campaign Against Health Fraud  
PO Box CAHF  
London WC1N 3XX**

**Members agree to declare their support of the campaign's aims, and have to be approved by the membership committee.**

**Annual subscription is £12.**

## Do newer hay fever drugs cause KO?

Hay fever antihistamine treatments which claim to be non-sedating can reduce people's abilities to carry out everyday tasks even though patients report no ill effects, according to a report in *General Practitioner* (February 24, 1989).

The report quotes Dr Ian Hindmarch from the human psychopharmacology research unit at Leeds University who says that those on older antihistamines were likely to fall momentarily asleep for a total of 4,000 seconds a day, which amounts to ten times more 'microsleep' than ordinary people.

Dr Hindmarch says even those on so called non-sedating hay fever treatments had levels of microsleep twice the normal average.

The effect, says the report, together with slower reactions time, could impair driving ability.

Many of the drugs which do cause sedation are available over the counter. Dr Hindmarch is quoted as suggesting that there should be stronger warnings on the packets of these drugs.

Dr Hindmarch is reported as saying: 'There's a strong lobby against [stronger warnings] because it would obviously change the market. But some independent body should be set up to take responsibility'.

**CAHF comment:** Those who promote orthodox medicines must ensure that their promotional claims are valid, or the medical profession and patients will be misled.

Dr Hindmarch's research is a challenge to conventional thinking about 'non-sedating' antihistamines. It should be taken seriously. If further studies support Dr Hindmarch's work, claims of a non-sedating effect will have to be reviewed, and possibly withdrawn.

Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily the agreed policy of the Campaign Against Health Fraud.

CAHF newsletter

# Why promotion of Pill supplement should be more tightly regulated

The author of a 1976 *British Medical Journal* case study being used to promote a health food company's 'Pill protection formula' has called the product unnecessary. 'I would't recommend it' Dr Daryl Tant is quoted as saying in *General Practitioner* (February 24, 1989).

Booker Nutritional Products is promoting its 'Ladycare vitamin and mineral formula for women' as a daily supplement to make up for vitamin and mineral 'deficiencies' in women taking the Pill. But the £2.82 a month supplement has worried the Family Planning Association who are concerned that it will exploit women's fears and anxieties over the Pill.

Family planning specialists say there is no good evidence that women suffer from vitamin deficiency with modern pills.

Brooker, part of the giant food group which owns Holland and Barret, Prewetts and many other of the health food big names is quoted as saying that a

survey, carried out for the company on 25 women had found that 70 per cent had suffered from symptoms like water retention, headaches, irritability, breast tenderness and depression related to vitamin or mineral deficiency.

The clinical and scientific advisory committee of the National Association of Family Planning Doctors has since issued a state-

ment that says: 'There is no evidence to support a view that modern Pills cause a significant decrease in vitamin or mineral levels, necessitating a supplement'.

**CAHF comment:** The survey carried out by the company is an inadequate basis to promote a product like this. Only if there is good evidence from properly conducted clinical trials, not anecdotes from case studies or surveys on an inadequate number of women, should such promotion be allowed.

The company's survey also lists vague complaints which may have many causes. Many of these symptoms get better on their own without treatment. The only way to see if such a product could help women would be to conduct a placebo controlled diet.

Such unscientific and selective promotion should be forbidden by law to protect consumers from exploitation.

'The only way to see if it works is through a placebo controlled trial'

## Why herb could be a natural danger

'Natural' medicines containing comfrey, and tea made from the herb may be doing more harm than good according to a recent paper in *The Lancet*.

The pyrrolizidine alkaloids in the plant can seriously damage the liver kidneys and pancreas of rats, and are also thought to cause hepatic veno-occlusive disease which results when the veins of the liver become diseased or distended. This can lead to serious liver failure.

Comfrey is promoted as a safe treatment useful against a range of diseases from gout to arthritis. But Paul Ridker of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and William McDermott from Harvard Medical School question whether the dangerous herb should be so freely available, when it can cause such health damage.

At least eight species of comfrey grow in Britain and those who promote herbal medicine re-

commend it widely. Penguin's *Herbal Medicine for Everyone*, for example, promotes the herb as having a healing and soothing effect on the stomach lining and as a 'natural cell healer'. It is also alleged to have helpful effects on the lungs and urinary tract.

The common way of giving comfrey 'treatment'—through a tea—seems to make matters worse by making higher levels of the dangerous alkaloids available in uncontrolled doses.

# Asking the questions that hang over holism

## Open mind

Douglas Stalker & Clark Glymour, eds.  
Prometheus books;  
hardback, pp406. £18.45

After I made a flippant remark about homeopathy, a non-medical colleague replied 'surely all enlightened doctors are using homeopathic remedies?' *Examining Holistic Medicine* should be required reading for anyone so 'enlightened'. The authors swiftly established that they are not mechanical medics, but are well aware of the claims and philosophies of 'alternative practitioners'.

Witness the widespread use in advertising of the term 'natural' as a symbol of a fundamentally appropriate, safe and effective route to health and healing. On the outskirts of medicine, the term of choice is not 'natural', but 'holistic'—and it is increasingly, and uncritically, accepted. The holistic movement claims a philosophical coherence.

The assumption appears to be of an alternative, more humane and coherent approach to health care than that offered by 'orthodox' medicine. This approach is typically contrasted with 'reductionism' (frequently not defined, merely assumed to be an intellectual sin), the apparent root problems within medicine.

This book does not simply point out the inadequacies of specific 'remedies', but exposes the intellectual sterility of the 'philosophy' of holism. There is no alternative, valid model for the experience of sickness to be found in homeopathy or chiropractic—their claims to offer one are studied carefully and found wanting.

The holistic movement argues that quantum mechanics somehow supports their practice. This argument is usually based upon a misrepresentation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, mixed with a misunderstanding of Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science. *Examining Holistic Medicine* exposes these claims as noxious falsehoods.

Iridology asserts that all parts of

the body are represented by the iris, and that ills can be diagnosed by its examination. This is demonstrably false, as the book shows.

Reflexology argues the same about the foot, as does a form of acupuncture for the ear. Perhaps our entire bodies are covered in little homunculi which only the alternative practitioners can see?

Anyone tempted to train in aromatherapy or homeopathy should ask themselves a few questions. Where does the information which forms the basis of the proposed practice come from? On what basis does the practitioner believe that a 'remedy' will have specific and predictable therapeutic value?

If these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily, doctors attending courses in homeopathy might well be taking the first steps towards gaining the deserved epithet of 'quack'.

The book contains a valuable motto: 'It is important to keep an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out'.

Nick Beard

# Cogent and succinct guide

Alternative, Unproven, and Fraud: a selected annotated bibliography. American Medical Association.

Available from Order Department OP137, American Medical Association, PO Box 10946, Chicago, Illinois 60610-0946).

Iridology was the brainchild of Dr Ignatz von Peezely of Hungary. Its adherents claim that a childhood observation of an injured owl's iris by von Peezely resulted in a treatise on iridology, published when he was 40. Non-adherents, the AMA says tartly, suggest that he developed the theory to while the way the time while languishing in prison after the 1848 Hungarian rebellion.

DMSO, a fad American remedy for arthritis, is prepared from lignin, a byproduct of paper manufacturing. Colonic irrigation can fatally affect the potassium levels in the blood; it has also caused severe colitis in a patient after self-administration of a soap enema for constipation. A colonic irrigation machine that was heavily contaminated with amoebic dysentery killed seven people, caused another ten to need minor surgery, and made many others ill.

Shortness is a virtue when combined with cogent information and succinctness. This 44-page book from the American Medical Association—its full title is *Alternative therapies, unproven methods and health fraud*—has informative sections on AIDS, acupuncture, arthritis, cancer, *Candida albicans*, cellular therapy, chelation therapy, colonic irrigation, cytotoxic testing,—to mention the first three letters of the alphabet. It gives up to a dozen key books or papers for each subject, and is full of fascinating snippets. It costs around £10 and can be bought by post quoting a credit card number.

Caroline Richmond

CAHF newsletter

## Pick up this nutritional Penguin

Sense and nonsense in nutrition

Jack Yetiv

Penguin Books 1988. ISBN 0-14-010054-7 318 pp.

Yetiv says in his introduction: 'while researching the topics for this book I was *awestruck* by the lack of nutrition knowledge among these people'. He was not referring to a newly-discovered Amazonian tribe but to the physicians, paramedical professionals, and non-medical people he discussed the book with while researching it.

This larger-format book is a mine of useful information. Did you know, for example, that the best way of measuring a person's fat to lean ratio was to weight them and then find out their specific gravity by water

displacement, using Archimedes' principle? And that the reason we know this is the best method is that it correlates best with carass analysis, a process unsuitable while we are still alive?

In addition to such arcane information it has masses of basic stuff, all fully referenced. If, for example, you want to know about diet and hyperactivity, you will find it here, along with such things as the efficacy of fish oils and the arguments about what is a desirable intake of selenium.

Clear enough for lay people and informative enough for professionals, this book is divided into two sections. *Who should you believe?* covers topics from laetrile to Christian Science, vitamins and neurotransmitters

to food allergy, life extension to tartrazine.

Section two, *Nutrients, the good, the bad and the ugly*, has chapters on cholesterol, sugar, vitamins, obesity, vegetarianism, fad diets and salts. Succinctly written, it is packed with blud-chip, copper-bottomed facts, with ample references to back them up. This book deserves to reach a wider audience. Would that all Penguin's list were as good as this.

Caroline Richmond

Contributions are welcome. Please write to: Campaign Against Health Fraud, Box CAHF, London WC1N 3XX or telephone the campaign's phone line on 01 673 4401