

“The Snake Oil Salesmen Are Back”

Step right up folks; we have the cure for what ails you! Back in the late 1800's snake oil salesmen touted cures for everything with a swig of this or that, typically the contents were alcohol, cocaine, or heroine. Well they're back, just as dangerous now as they were back then. “Alternative Medicine” – Those words conjure up visions of all sorts of gizmos, dietary supplements, and rituals. Webster's dictionary defines alternative (n) as “a proposition or situation offering a choice between two incompatible things.”

The purveyors of alternative medicine will try and convince the public that it has credibility by reciting all manner of testimonials and anecdotal stories. The thing that is lacking is science, or it wouldn't be “alternative”. What we practice is called Western Medicine and it is based on science. The scientific method demands proof (evidence based) and reproducibility. True science, as opposed to junk science, is based on clinical trials, which can and do take an enormous amount of time and painstaking hard work. In the end it is worth the effort as it allows us to provide the public with the utmost quality of care.

I'll never forget my first experience with alternative medicine. My patient had a small neuroesthesioblastoma and was all set up for a combined approach excision by myself and one of the neurosurgeons at BNI. A few days before surgery he informed me that he was seeking an alternative treatment up near the Grand Canyon. This treatment was dietary, consisting mostly of various roots and berries. Needless to say I was shocked (I was a lot younger then) and despite my warnings and pleas he proceeded with the alternative route. Three years later he somehow found his way back to my office due to a nosebleed from herniating brain tissue through his nose. He had no recollection of my having seen him before due to the large amount of frontal lobe involvement. By then it was too late.

“Coning” is another alternative treatment. For those of you that haven't encountered this amazing ritual, it involves a purveyor placing a “cone” of various herbs and ingredients in the persons ear and igniting it with a match. Can you imagine letting someone place a fiery object that close to one of your major sense organs! It claims to cleanse the ear of wax and other things, boost the immune system and alleviate a litany of other ailments. Since this ritual was becoming more prevalent, my specialty society, The American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, undertook a study to see, if indeed, there was any proof to the claims that were touted. It was a good scientific study and showed that “coning” was devoid of any of the healthful claims that they espoused. The cleansing that was supposed to be occurring as “*evidenced*” by a brown substance shown to the person afterward was just carbon and residue from the ignition of the cone!

“Chelation therapy” as an alternative treatment has surfaced again recently. An ad recently published in one of the local newspapers claimed that chelation therapy is an alternative to open heart surgery. So is death. This ad also states that chelation therapy treats Alzheimer's disease, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Kidney Stones, Multiple Sclerosis,

Lupus, Parkinson's disease and Lou Gehrig's disease. As we all know, the *only* approved use for chelation is for heavy metal poisoning.

"Cupping" is another form touting beneficial effects. It involves a purveyor placing "cups" on a person and then alternatively putting a candle inside the cups while raising and lowering them, (notice the common thread of fire?) Shocking, as it may seem, there is no scientific proof here either!

It would seem appropriate that the purveyors would wear painted masks and feathers when they perform these shenanigans wouldn't it? No, the dangerous part is that they disguise themselves in white coats! My message in all this is that we must be vigilant in our efforts to try our best to warn and protect our patients and the public from the purveyors. We usually scoff and chuckle amongst ourselves when we hear of such happenings but rarely are we vocal enough in our advocacy role. Condonement can and is often times mistakenly interpreted as passive approval. At the end of the day, the public looks to us for affirmations. Let them have no misunderstanding of the high standards that we hold ourselves and our colleagues to and those high standards are based on what we hold sacred, science.

When the purveyors get really sick, do they reach for the crystals, magnets, laetrile and copper bracelets? No. They come see us. I've treated my fair share so I know you have too! Why? Because deep down, in their own hearts, they know they want a real doctor.

Nothing beats the real thing!

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