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Quackery ... The Billion Dollar Miracle Business

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QUACKERY ... The Billion Dollar MIRACLE Business

This brochure is a joint publication of:
The Federal Trade Commission
The Pharmaceutical Advertising Council
The U.S. Food and Drug Administration
The U.S. Postal Service

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This year, Americans will spend billions of dollars on products that do nothing for us—or may even harm us. And we'll do it the same reason people have done it since ancient times...we want to believe in miracles. We want to find simple solutions and shortcuts to better health.

It's hard to resist. All of us, at one time or another, have seen or heard about a product—a new and exotic pill, device, or potion—that can easily solve our most vexing problem. With this product, we're told, we can eat all we want and still lose weight. We can grow taller or build a bigger bustline. Or we can overcome baldness, age, arthritis, even cancer.

It sounds too good to be true—and it is. But we're tempted to try the product in spite of all we know about modern medical science—or perhaps because of it. After all, many treatments we take for granted today were once regarded as miracles. How can we tell the difference?

Separating Facts From Fantasy

Not all advertisements for health products are false, of course. In fact, the vast majority aren't. So just what is quackery? Simply put, quackery is the promotion of a medical remedy that can't work or hasn't been proven to work. In modern times, quackery may manifest itself as cancer cure fraud. But call it quackery or call it health fraud, the result is the same—unfulfilled wishes, wasted dollars, endangered health.

Often, quack products are fairly easy to spot, like the magic pills you are supposed to take to stay forever young. But sometimes the products are vaguely based on some medical report that you may even have heard about in the news.

In general, when looking over ads for medicines and medical devices, watch out for those that:

- Your Postmaster or the Postal Inspection Service.
- Your state's Attorney General
- Your nearest office of the Food and Drug Administration
- The Better Business Bureau
- Your local consumer office
- Your state's Attorney General
- Your nearest office of the Food and Drug Administration
- Your Postmaster or the Postal Inspection Service.

The High Price of Health Fraud

Quack cures rob us of more than money. They can steal health away or even lives. Quacks may lure the seriously and often desperately ill, such as people suffering from arthritis and cancer, into buying a bogus cure. When people try quack remedies instead of getting effective medical help, their illnesses progress, sometimes beyond the treatable stage.

Today's Targets for Quack Attacks

Quacks have always been quick to exploit current thinking. The snake-oil salesmen a few generations back carried an array of "natural" remedies to sell to a public that was still close to the frontier. And today quacks take advantage of the back-to-nature movement, capitalizing on the notion that there ought to be simple, natural solutions to almost any problem. Some current target areas for such promotions include:

- Arthritis. Over 30 million Americans suffer from arthritis, and the nature of the disease makes it fertile ground for fraud. And because symptoms may come and go, or the disease may be in remission for several years, arthritis sufferers may actually believe, at least temporarily, that they've been cured by a quack remedy.
- Cancer. Here quack cures are probably the cruellest and the most expensive. Seriously ill people may spend thousands of dollars on phony treatments that do nothing to relieve their disease or suffering. Often, the quack cancer treatment clinics are set up just outside the United States, so that they're beyond the jurisdiction of U.S. authorities. Before you request medical help, their illnesses progress, sometimes beyond the treatable stage.
- Weight Loss. It's hard to resist. All of us, at one time or another, have seen or heard about a product—a new and exotic pill, device, or potion—that can easily solve our most vexing problem. With this product, we're told, we can eat all we want and still lose weight. We can grow taller or build a bigger bustline. Or we can overcome baldness, age, arthritis, even cancer.

How can we tell the difference?

Quack Advertising—The Need for Healthy Skepticism

Many people believe that advertising is screened by a government agency and that, therefore, all claims about health products in the ads must be truthful. This is not the case with most health-care products, except for those drugs and medical devices that require pre-market approval by FDA. There is no federal, state or local government that approves or verifies claims in advertisements or TV commercials. Legitimate authorities can take action only after the advertisements have appeared.

This holds for claims of a "money-back guarantee." Many quacks are fly-by-night operators who don't respond to refund demands. Often, by the time refund requests come in, they have changed their address to avoid law enforcement officials.

Invest Your Time Before You Invest Your Money

Beware of Testimonials That Sound Too Fantastic to Be True

Health fraud promoters are fond of using testimonials from "satisfied users" to promote their products. However, beware of testimonials reporting incredible, fantastic medical results, especially when no medical support for the claim is offered. This is particularly important since "satisfied users" may, in some cases, have experienced the sugar pill, or "placebo," effect. The placebo effect occurs when people believing they have been given a real medicine, experience a benefit from it. It is the power of suggestion at work.

You Can Protect Yourself

Invest your time before you invest your money. Apply the "it-sounds-too-good-to-be-true" test to ads for health products by watching for these common characteristics of quackery:

- A quick and painless cure.
- A "special," "secret," "ancient," or "foreign" formula, available only through the mail and only from one supplier.
- Testimonials or case histories from satisfied users as the only proof that the product works.
- A product effective for a wide variety of ailments.
- A scientific "breakthrough" or "miracle cure" that has been held back or overlooked by the medical community.

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Before buying a suspect product or treatment, find out more about it. Check with one or more of the following:

- Your doctor, pharmacist, or other health professional
- The Better Business Bureau
- Your local consumer office
- Your state's Attorney General
- Your nearest office of the Food and Drug Administration
- Your Postmaster or the Postal Inspection Service.