

QUACKERY: A DOCTOR'S NIGHTMARE



(Dr. Rohit Sharma,
M.D.S., Consultant
Oral and Maxillofacial
Surgeon and Implantologist)

Quackery is a very common sighting in India, with people claiming to cure everything from infertility to cancer, companies selling mass-produced "natural" products claiming to cure every problem under the sun. Even qualified doctors are known to suggest things that patients do not really need. Everyone wants to become younger, thinner and to live longer. So it is not surprising that quackery flourishes all over the world. The top characteristic of quackery is the product's hype and promotion, rather than simply fraud and greed, though these qualities often go concurrently. Most of the quackery is involved in informing people that something is bad for them (such as allopathic medicines) and selling a substitute (such as "organic" or "natural" supplements). Quackery is also involved in misleading advertising of dietary supplements, homoeopathic products or ayurvedic

medicines. Some products can indeed be useful for some purposes, but marketing them for every disease can render them worthless. For example some vitamin supplements can be life-saving in certain anemias, but giving them as "energy tonics" is a form of medical fraud. Similarly, certain ayurvedic herbs can be very useful, but many alleged ayurvedic medicines available in medical stores can be completely useless, as they do not contain what they are supposed to. Similarly, certain homoeopathic medicines can be helpful, as they are tailor made for a particular person and only a skilled homoeopathic physician can identify the required medicines properly. But taking a standard over-the-counter homoeopathic remedy for certain common illnesses such as headaches and colds flouts the basic principle of homoeopathy. Quackery can harm individuals

in many ways. There is loss of a tremendous amount of money which patients invested in pursuing the treatment. People do not tend to realize the total money spent on quacks, as very little amounts of money is extracted at a time, amounting to huge figures in the end. A dacoit tends to take either a person's money or his life, whereas a quack takes both money and life, as many of his therapies can cause direct harm. Quacks tend to thrive as there is no clear machinery to act against them. While the Medical Council of India can initiate steps against qualified doctors indulging in unethical practice, it cannot touch a quack. Even the health department cannot take any direct action, and has to file a complaint with the police, and the police cannot act on its own, without any complaint being filed. As a result, such unscrupulous people are roaming around free. It is a common misconception

that natural medicines have no side-effects. In reality, anything which has an effect has the potential to cause side-effects. The indirect harm caused by these therapies can also be enormous, like patients landing in the hands of "Babas" to get their cancers treated deprive themselves of the opportunity of getting effective, state-of-the-art medical treatment. Faith healing is an integral part of Indian tradition, especially in villages where "educated" priests take advantage of people's ignorance and blind faith. Many of the "well-informed" people believe that they are far more sophisticated than the illiterate villager, way above to fall prey to quacks. What they do not understand is that quackery is not just going to unqualified personnel to get oneself treated, but also refers to products widely being advertised over all forms of media, making tall but fake claims of their products. Almost everybody, at some point of time or the other, would have tried at least one product which promises to either make one grow more hair, make a better lover out of a person, remove the wrinkles, make one lose excess weight, or improve the memory. The advertisements for these products being so prevalent mean that they have a ready and gullible audience. A quack often keeps his methods secret to prevent others from decisively demonstrating that it does not work. No one who actually discovers a cure would keep it secret. If a method works,

especially for a serious disease, the person would tend to gain enormous fame and fortune by sharing the discovery. Quackery often dresses itself in a cloak of pseudo-scientific respectability and its promoters often use scientific terms and quotes from scientific references, like claiming to "detoxify" the body, "balance" its chemistry, release the "negative energy" or "bring it in harmony with nature". These products use concepts that are impossible to measure or quantify, and the success is claimed even when nothing has actually been accomplished. Many of such people claim that most diseases are caused by faulty nutrition and can be cured by taking supplements. Most of the diseases are not related to diet at all. In cases where diet actually is a factor in a person's disease, the solution is not to take supplements but to make necessary alterations in the diet. One of quackery's most powerful appeals is the suggestion to "think for oneself" instead of following collective wisdom of scientific community, which is based on years of unremitting studies and research. All humans have the same anatomy and physiology, and scientific rules apply equally to all people. Any claim which sounds "too good to be true" most likely is a sham. The best way one can protect himself from being taken for a ride is to make sure that one is well informed about his own body.