

HISTORY OF MEDICINE

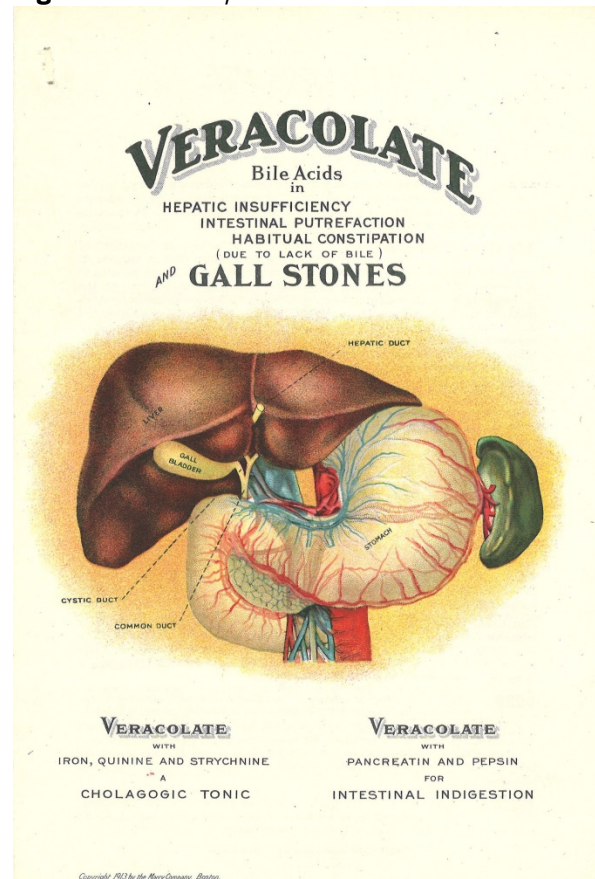
Ads and Labels From Early 20th-Century Health Fraud Promotions

Amber Dushman, MA, MLIS

Abstract

Ten advertisements and labels from the American Medical Association (AMA) Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection illustrate false health beliefs perpetuated in 20th-century medical quackery promotions. This article canvasses some of the claims made and responses to these ads and labels.

Figure 1. *No Relief From Veracolate or the AMA's Chemists*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹

Veracolate, made by the Marcy Company of Boston, Massachusetts, claimed to aid indigestive problems with iron, quinine, and strychnine. Upon review of Veracolate's

actual chemical composition in 1915, the American Medical Association (AMA) found it to be “semisecret in composition, unscientific in combination.”² The AMA noted that Veracolate’s claims were “unwarranted” and wrote to an inquiring woman from Chicago, “A person who continually uses Veracolate ... has simply developed the cathartic habit... They [Veracolate tablets] contain two digestive ferments that are utterly incompatible when given in one tablet.”³ Veracolate tablets claimed to contain 2 ingredients: pepsin and pancreatin; however, when taken in a tablet form, they were ineffective. Pepsin, a palliative ingredient in Veracolate, is only active in an acid medium, and pancreatin has to act in an alkaline medium, rendering these tablets ineffective for real digestive issues when taken in tablet form.

Figure 2. *The Cry of the Cells*, 1917



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.⁴

From the early 1910s through World War II, Oak Balm was advertised as a women’s at-home treatment for ailments of the vaginal tract, allowing customers to treat themselves in the privacy of their own homes. The manufacturer, Hager Medical Company in South Bend, Indiana, used a free booklet to sell Oak Balm through a dramatic storytelling of a history of the body, pain, and remedies. The booklet declares, “When the cells are congested and they cannot find relief locally, they cry for help and this CRY OF THE CELLS is called ‘Pain.’”⁵ The Oak Balm manufacturer claimed to remedy pain in females due to menstrual cramps or a rigid cervix, which caused infertility.⁶ According to AMA Propaganda Department chemists, who were responsible for gathering and disseminating information concerning health fraud and quackery, the preparation consisted of 2 suppositories made up of boric acid, alum, and cacao butter, but no tannin. Therefore, no oak constituent was present, which was ironic considering the product was named “Oak Balm.”

The AMA did not recommend Oak Balm and questioned its claims of “prompt, pleasant and permanent” cures of all diseases of women, including cancer, gall stones, and arthritis.⁷ The Propaganda Department was later renamed the Department of Investigation and answered inquiries from physicians, local Better Business Bureau

offices across the United States, the news media, and members of the public. In the process of preparing answers to these inquiries, the Department also corresponded with federal and state regulatory agencies, state and county medical societies, and experts in the field to verify the legitimacy of promoters' claims. This work was done long before the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took it over in 1975.

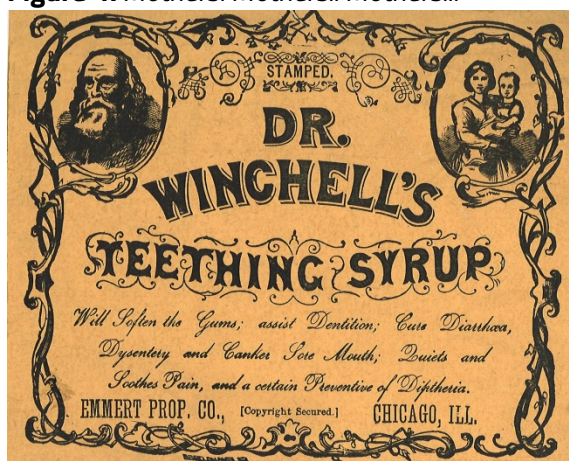
Figure 3. *You'll Feel Like a New Person*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.⁸

This common device of the early 20th century purported to cure most ills of the flesh by means of a violet-colored electrical discharge, which gave a mild superficial stimulation to the part of the body to which it was applied. "Violet-Rays applied by the Violetta reach every cell, tissue and organ of your body—reviving, vitalizing and energizing every atom of your make-up.... From the first treatment you'll feel like a new person," claimed the Vi-Rex Company of Chicago.⁹ The company promised consumers increased mental and physical energy and more general success if they used the Violetta. The AMA deemed these claims false in a 1929 letter to Mr K. B. Williamson at the National Better Business Bureau.¹⁰

Figure 4. Mothers! Mothers!! Mothers!!!



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹¹

The Emmert Proprietary Company of Chicago, Illinois, sold this deadly product during a brief 2-year period from 1910 to 1912, making claims directed toward mothers that it "was the best medicine for diseases incident to infancy." Manufacturers claimed that the syrup "quiets and soothes all pain," "cures diarrhea and dysentery in the worst forms," and "cures ... diphtheria."¹² The AMA reported very little on Dr Winchell's Teething Syrup but disputed the above claims as false and misleading and reported in *Nostrums and Quackery* that the tonic was misbranded.

Figure 5. Mail Order Cure

A vertical, rectangular advertisement for Dr. W. O. Coffee's World-Famous Home Treatment for Deafness. The top half features the text "Sensational OFFER!" in large, bold, red letters. Below this, a large black number "5" is prominently displayed, with "ONLY \$5" to its left and "Pays for the full 3 Months' Course of" to its right. The product name "Dr. W. O. Coffee's World-Famous Home Treatment for DEAFNESS" is written in bold, black and red text. The bottom half of the ad contains several paragraphs of small text, including a "Our Last Special Offer for a Limited Time Only—ACT!" and the address "DR. W. O. COFFEE CO. : : : DAVENPORT, IOWA, U. S. A." A vertical signature "W. O. Coffee" is written on the right side of the ad.

Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹³

Dr W. O. Coffee's advertisement is an example of 20th-century quackery and mail-order fraud. Proprietor William O. Coffee was a long-time practitioner of fraud who died in 1927; however, not wanting the profitable business to die with his father, his son, P. E. Coffee, carried on his legacy. P. E. Coffee held a degree in homeopathy but was never licensed to practice medicine in the United States and operated the business out of Davenport, Iowa. The W. O. Coffee Company used well-established mail-order methods—in particular, a follow-up system by which several letters were sent to persons who did not act on earlier mailings.

The so-called deafness treatment in this advertisement consisted of 2 powders, an inhalant, oils for the ear, a salve for the nose, another ointment for the ears, and laxative tablets. In a hearing that was part of a lawsuit against Coffee, the company revealed that 2 women without medical training working for the company would “diagnose” deafness in patients and furnish treatments. In one response, Arthur Cramp of the AMA addressed the American Federation of Organizations for the Hard of Hearing and explained that the number of deafness-cure quacks was large in comparison with medical charlatans in general because the patient, after receiving a discouraging verdict from scientific medicine, often turned hopefully to the allure of false claims.¹⁴

Figure 6. *Hair Grows Like a Plant*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹⁵

Recommended for use a few minutes a day, the Modern Vacuum Cap of Baldness allegedly stopped hair loss and dandruff. According to advertisers who actively promoted the apparatus between 1915 and 1930, all it took was science and common sense. In reality, the vacuum cap was a rubber head piece from which air was removed by a hand pump. “It’s bunk,” stated the AMA in a 1927 letter to the National Better Business Bureau.¹⁶ The device produced a passive hyperemia, an increase—equivalent to mild stimulation—in the amount of blood in scalp vasculature but did not grow hair. The AMA further explained to the Better Business Bureau, “In the vast majority of cases of

baldness, the hair follicle is destroyed, and you might just as well expect to grow a new finger when a finger has been cut off as to grow new hair where the hair is actually gone.”¹⁶ The AMA condemned the cap as injurious to the scalp, hair, and head.

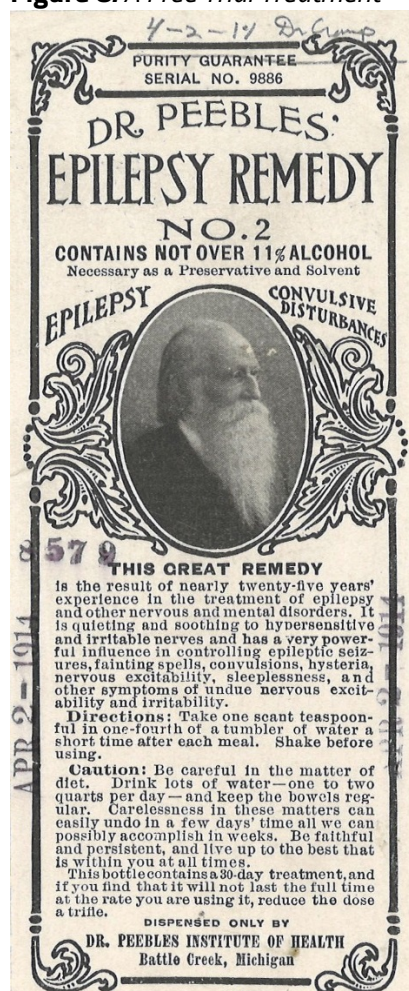
Figure 7. *The Natural Way to Health*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹⁷

This early health food vendor advertised to prospective customers through [chiropractors](#) and other “drugless healers” during the post-World War I years through the Depression years of the 1930s. The manufacturer of Normalettes claimed to cure all in the “the Family Group of Ten: Catarrh, constipation, indigestion, tonic, rejuvenation, underweight, goiter, female diseases, overweight and the growing child.”¹⁸ The nostrum itself was a tablet containing ground plant material coated with chalk and sugar. Other formulas included small amounts of phenolphthalein (laxative) and bile salts, starch digestant, charcoal, and baking soda. According to letters to inquiring physicians and members of the public, the AMA noted that it did not analyze Normalettes so it could not comment on the effects of the pills, but it did warn of the company’s quackish claims and advised that results sought by taking Normalettes could be achieved by a well-balanced diet full of vitamins and minerals. Normalettes does not seem to have advertised beyond Southern California, and the AMA received very few requests for information, which explains why the AMA Bureau of Investigation did not analyze the nostrum.

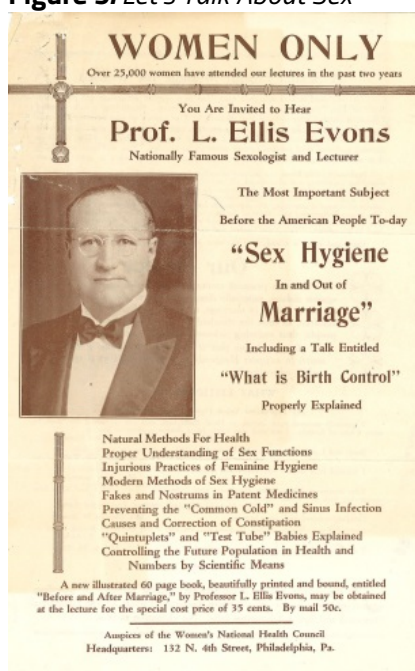
Figure 8. A Free Trial Treatment



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.¹⁹

J. M. Peebles of Dr Peebles' Epilepsy Remedy received a fraudulent degree from Philadelphia University of Medicine and Surgery and operated out of Battle Creek, Michigan, during the first quarter of the 20th century. He reached his victims in the usual manner through advertisements placed in newspapers and magazines. He offered a "free trial treatment," which, combined with scare tactics and claims of cures, acted as bait to desperate members of the public who suffered seizures. The chemical breakdown of Dr Peebles' Epilepsy Remedy was 8.4% alcohol and roughly 22% ammonia, potassium, sodium, bromide, and chloride.²⁰ As the AMA noted, "The use of bromid[e]s in the treatment of epilepsy has been known for years" but was, at best, palliative—a far cry from Peebles' claim that the compound offered a cure. The drug acted as a sedative, generally tending to suppress some seizures. Despite this effect, the AMA did not recommend Dr Peebles' Epilepsy Remedy to epileptics because the "indiscriminate use" of bromides was dangerous.²⁰ Early studies had found that long-term use of bromides caused irritability, depression, hallucinations, and homicidal tendencies.²⁰

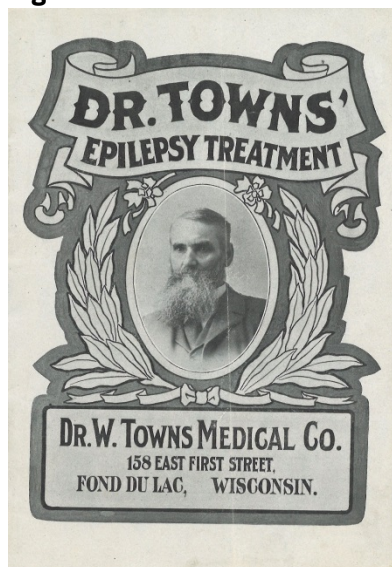
Figure 9. *Let's Talk About Sex*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.²¹

Professor Evons operated out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was widely known for his lecture series on sex. But sex talks weren't the only thing Professor L. Ellis Evons was selling. He was peddling oxylin antiseptic tablets for guarding against vaginal infections.²² This poisonous drug was found to contain over 50% boric acid by an FDA inspector. Gearing his products towards women, he also used these lectures to distribute contraceptives. He advertised himself as a "noted biologist and sexologist." However, according to correspondence between the AMA and the Better Business Bureau of Philadelphia in 1934, the Bureau of Investigation revealed "he was wholly unknown to [the] science world."²³ Professor Evons was operating during a time when the Comstock Laws made discussion and distribution of contraceptives illegal. He used the "Women's National Health Council," a sham operation, as a front to arrange his well-attended lectures. Although they were ostensibly free, he did ask for donations from the women who attended. It's believed that he secretly sold his contraceptives in a back room after these lectures. In 1935, he was fined for distributing contraceptives in Philadelphia. Just one year prior, he had been arrested in Albany, New York, for giving a lecture on birth control as part of a sting operation that involved the AMA. At the June 1938 annual meeting, the AMA passed policy "so that physicians may legally give contraceptive information to their patients,"²⁴ reflecting the changing laws and acceptance of dispensing contraceptives as a valid medical practice in the United States.

Figure 10. *You Cured Me*



Courtesy of the American Medical Association Archives.²⁵

Dr Towns' Epilepsy Treatment purported, "Most physicians claim there is no cure.... We claim there is a positive, permanent and speedy cure."²⁶ The Dr W. Towns' Medical Company of Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin, was one of many providers of fake cures for epilepsy during the early 20th century. As reported in *JAMA*, Towns circulated a leaflet giving what he called "endorsements" of his nostrum and published a celebratory editorial about his nostrum in the *American Journal of Health*.²⁷ However, this editorial meant little to those who knew that the *American Journal of Health* would endorse any fake willing to pay its publication fee.²⁷ Federal chemists found that Towns' nostrum consisted of sweetened, flavored ammonium bromide and salt, a sugar-coated pill of sulphonyl mixed with talcum and tolu, and black pills composed of charcoal, sugar, phosphorus, and inorganic matter, with a small amount of strychnine-bearing material. These chemists declared Towns' Epilepsy Treatment misbranded as a "cure" for epilepsy.²⁷ Federal authorities prosecuted Towns for making false and misleading claims; Towns pleaded guilty and was fined.

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Amber Dushman, MA, MLIS is the manager of the American Medical Association's Department of Records Management and Archives in Chicago, Illinois, where she has managed the organization's historical collections since 2010. She holds a master's degree in public history from Loyola University Chicago and a master's of library and information science degree from Dominican University.

Citation

AMA J Ethics. 2018;20(11):E1082-1093.

DOI

10.1001/amajethics.2018.1082.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The author(s) had no conflicts of interest to disclose.

The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.