



Medicine for Managers

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A History of Quackery

A Quack is defined as someone who fraudulently or ignorantly professes to have medical skills, knowledge or qualifications which he or she does not possess. The person is a charlatan. The term is believed to originate from the word *quacksalver* or *kwakzalver*, a Dutch word for a seller of *nostrums*, which are potions described as medicines but prepared by an unqualified person and considered to be without any clinically effective benefit.

Such purveyors of so-called medicines have existed since there were illnesses and people who were gullible enough to believe that an effective cure or treatment was available. Such fraudulent imposters were not just from times gone by, and there are still charlatans even today.

In the United Kingdom the MHRA (The Medicines and Health Products Regulatory Agency) is responsible for regulation of medicines.

It was established in 2003 and standards are very high in this country. It is, however, still possible to find outlets for fake, ineffective, and dangerous medications concocted from unsterile, inappropriate or useless components.

The United Kingdom has a rich history of quackery. During the period of the Great Plague in 1665, when most reputable licensed physicians had left London, it was later reported by Dale Ingram, an English Surgeon:

"...recourse was had to chymists, quacks. . . Everyone was at liberty to prescribe what nostrum he pleased, and there was scarce a street in which some antidote was not sold, under some pompous title"



De Kwakzalver, attributed to the Dutch painter Jan Steen (1650-1679)

Quacks proliferated. They were unregulated, untrained, mostly uneducated, or insufficiently educated or skilled to enter physicians' guilds. Many though had 'the chat' and sold their remedies on street corners or at the ubiquitous country fairs providing homemade remedies.

Their shouty, attention-seeking voices were said to sound like noisy ducks or geese, which has led to an alternative suggestion for the origin of the word 'quack'. They dressed to attract.

They were at their most successful at times when dangerous diseases were rampant. In previous centuries, those with genuine medical

skills would hurriedly leave the area if infection was prevalent, allowing the quacks to operate with no competition, to provide tonics and dubious treatments.

In Venice, managing Plague and other illnesses had become organised in the City by the end of the fourteenth century.

Public health infrastructure was in place and the authorities reviewed information to understand how plague moved and how and by what it could be stopped.

The word '*quarantine*' derives from the Italian '*quaranta giorni*' or forty days, the time plague cases and travellers were isolated on a Venetian island. Venice was relatively plague-free during the seventeenth century when it ravaged most of Europe including the UK, limiting the success of quackery.

Quacks particularly targeted vulnerable people who could not afford any sort of reputable medicine or who were regarded as hopeless cases.

Daniel Defoe wrote of the predatory way the quacks peddled nostrums selling safety and cure for payment. I have Such claims included 'infallible preventive pills', 'Sovereign cordials against polluted air', 'Anti-plague water' and 'The Royal infection antidote'.

Using quack remedies was a major risk in itself. Plague remedies included toxic agents to induce vomiting, believed to eject toxins, and one remedy included the flesh of a viper "to fight the plague's poison with its own". Other quacks recommended inhaling wood smoke or tobacco smoking to ward off 'bad air'.

The quacks operated throughout Europe in the same way, selling their products which were, at worst, lethal and , at best, ineffective. T

he more respected and educated doctors also made mistakes but were more likely to provide treatment that was, at worst, less harmful and which often had the benefits of early medical networks to inform of efficacy.

During the Great Plague in London, some charlatans utilised innovative techniques to hoodwink potential 'clients'.

The astrologer, William Lilly, became extremely wealthy through payments received from rich clients reading their fortunes in the stars and prescribing health tonics and even determining the most auspicious days for bloodletting.

Others reached the huge eminence and even obtained Royal Patronage. James Angier convinced King Charles II and his Privy Council that he could sterilise plague houses by burning brimstone inside.

William Read, an English tailor, became an itinerant charlatan and styled himself as an eye surgeon. He was knighted by Queen Anne and appointed Royal Oculist in 1705.

The eighteenth century was a golden age of quackery. Very successful was Joanna Stephens who, in the 1730s, claimed to be able to cure gallstones.

She said she would disclose the treatment for £5,000, which was a huge sum of money. When private subscriptions failed to obtain the funding, Parliament became involved and appointed a commission with medical membership.

The commission reported itself 'convinced by experiment of [its] utility and efficiency'. The £5,000 was paid and the inventor disclosed her prescription, which included crushed snails, powdered egg shells, rose hips, soap and honey. If anyone achieved improvement, it can only have been by luck or suggestion.

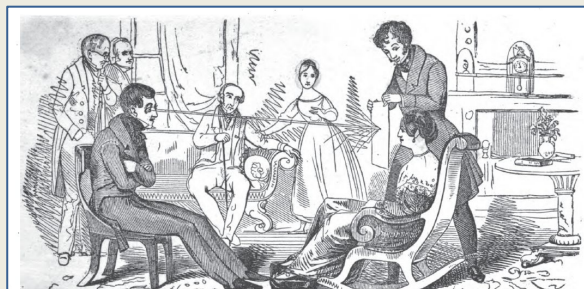
Other money making schemes revolved around the costly mud-baths for the ladies of fashion, invented by the Scot,



James Graham, and the use of magnetism, promoted by Valentine Greatraks, which involved stroking diseased areas with a magnetised iron bar.

In the demonstration of his technique, he treated publicly a man with numb fingers, demonstrated by testing them with pins and evoking no response, and subsequently showing sensation after using the magnetised bar.

The demonstration, an effective use of quack technique, was sufficient to impress members of the Royal Society including Robert Boyle.



The technique was widely promoted, sometimes using additional treatments such as mesmerism to treat conditions such as somnambulism (sleep-walking) as in the drawing, but faded into

obscurity, although not without the proponents making large sums of money.

Most quacks were men, but there were women who often provided practical treatment. One such famous woman was Sarah 'Crazy Sally' Mapp, known for her acid tongue and her ability to reset bones.

Although untrained, she would reset broken, slipped and dislocated bones and joints, usually with brute force. She was often drunk, but gained a



considerable reputation, working in Epsom and travelling to London twice a week, from where she operated in the Grecian Coffee House.

She operated under the name "Cracked Sally – the one and only Bone-setter". She 'practised' during the early decades of the nineteenth century dying in 1837 as a result of loss of business and increasing drunkenness.

Quacks and so-called 'snake-oil salesmen' proliferated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, peddled many cures during the global influenza epidemic.

Remedies included eucalyptus and camphor, which patients swallowed to 'sterilise themselves internally'.

Other colourfully named products were 'Foley's Honey', 'Riley's 24-hour Flu Insurance' and 'Cascara' and were sold in profusion. Conventional medicine had come a long way but the quacks still found a ready market in the poor and uneducated.

In the later nineteenth century in the US and Europe, established doctors became increasingly obsessed about quackery. Qualified doctors asked why their training could count for nothing when a charlatan could put up a plate and advertise for patients.

[Early success was patchy.](#)

In France orthodoxy persuaded the State to enact and enforce a code to exclude unqualified practitioners treating patients.

Britain was more reticent and, though it was agreed that no-one should treat people under false pretences, pretending to be qualified, and that only doctors could prescribe drugs and treat in hospitals, no man should be penalised for treating patients simply because he was not a member of the medical profession.

In the 1930s, a study discovered that, in patients treated with various drugs for angina pectoris (heart pain), almost forty percent gained relief from bicarbonate of soda.

The concept of the placebo was born, and for many, there was a realisation that previously baffling success by quacks in a significant minority of patients might have a scientific basis.

Such people were described as placebo-reactors. It explained why quack prescriptions which so often gave impressive initial results, later disappointed.

[Quackery is still around today.](#)

It has obtained a new lease of life through the internet. Misinformation and the promotion of inappropriate and sometimes dangerous compounds as effective treatments still occurs.

Many will remember, in 2020, President Trump enthusiastically promoting chloroquine, the anti-malarial drug, as a 'game changer' in the fight against coronavirus.

The drug was subsequently found to have little or no effect against the virus but did have dangerous side effects.

In a world where medical care is easily available to those people who live in developed countries, more than 45% of people throughout the planet do not obtain even basic medical care and who contend with poverty which precludes their ability to obtain often expensive medical services.

In such circumstances quackery is alive and well and dubious alleged remedies are there for those in need of help.

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