Dentistry and Pseudoscience

American dentistry is being flooded with disproven and unproven methods.

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American dentistry is being inundated with a plethora of disproven and unproven methods. Many factors have led dentists to first accept and then promulgate fraudulent health philosophies. It is important to be aware of some of these “holistic” practices and to examine the weaknesses in our education and health-care systems that allow them to proliferate.

Dental school is basically authoritarian; memorization, not understanding, is what is needed for success. Surprisingly, very little about the scientific method is taught, and virtually no research or study of basic scientific logic is included in the curriculum. This leads inexorably to the easy acceptance of fallacious ideas.

Dentistry is a cottage industry, with the vast majority of dentists in solo practice. This allows the dentist to perform treatments without the critical appraisal of colleagues. But what of the American Dental Association, other dental organizations, and continuing-education courses? Unfortunately, membership in the ADA is voluntary, and it is considered to be an educational rather than a disciplinary organization.

Any group of dentists can form an impressive-sounding association; there is even a National Board of Homeopathy in Dentistry. Many of these organizations have journals that publish invalid, poorly executed, and anecdotal studies. Because dentists do not receive the training they need in scientific method, one sees correlation being mistaken again and again for causation throughout these nonrefereed journals. These groups also may award “diplomate” or “fellowship” certificates to dentists who take courses they sponsor or to those dentists who just belong and pay dues. These certificates can be very misleading to the public.

The continuing-education departments of many dental schools have abro-

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gated their responsibilities to skeptically scrutinize the teachers and the courses given under the imprimatur of the dental school. More than 104 courses on blatantly false health-care methods were given at American dental schools in 1985. The participating dentists are not told that they are receiving fringe, discredited, or unproven theory. Instead, they are impressed by the authoritarian figure lecturing them from the university lectern. There seems to be a fear of being labeled a “censor,” and of course these lectures also earn money for the school.

The following is a short list of courses that are being given for continuing-education credit at many dental schools:

**Reflexology.** This is the diagnosis and treatment of disease by examining and massaging the soles of the feet.

**Acupuncture.** This discredited technique (see *Lancet*, May 26, 1984) is taught widely to both dentists and physicians. Dentists usually are taught auriculotherapy, or acupuncture of the ear lobe. Perhaps by working close to the mouth these dentists feel they will avoid being accused of practicing medicine without a license.

**Nutrition counseling.** Many dentists have found it profitable to sell vitamins and food supplements to their patients. They often base their faulty advice on such discredited tests as hair analysis, the lingual ascorbic acid test, and cytotoxic testing.

**Kinesiology.** This is an offshoot of chiropractic, and like chiropractic it is based on false theory of how the human body works. Many patients who
complain of facial pain are diagnosed as having “TMJ” (temporomandibular joint, the jaw joint) syndrome. Using kinesiology for diagnosis, practitioners put patients through invasive grinding of their teeth, insertion of bite-changing appliances, and even jaw surgery, in spite of the fact that research shows that jaw exercises, moist heat, and anti-inflammatory or muscle-relaxing drugs like motrin or valium are equally effective.

Cranial osteopathy. The bones of the skull are tightly and immovably sutured together, but this theory says that they move and that, although this movement cannot be detected by the finest scientific instruments, the delicate fingers of the cranial osteopath can not only feel the vibrations but can readjust them for optimum health—at an appropriate fee.

Mercury toxicity. The silver fillings a dentist places in patients’ teeth are really a mixture of a silver/tin/copper/zinc alloy and mercury. While all major health organizations recognize the safety of silver fillings, a small group of dentists are blaming a host of diseases and conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, immune deficiency diseases, and emotional conditions, on the minuscule amount of mercury that may leak out of a filling. They recommend that all silver fillings be removed and replaced with either plastic or gold, a very profitable recommendation. (The March 1986 Consumer Reports published an investigation of this practice.)

“Holistic dentistry.” All of the theories mentioned above and many more form the basis of “holistic” practice. These dentists are “wellness” oriented. Although “wellness” is not in the dictionary, it appears to be the disease the “holistic” dentist treats and gets paid for treating, although the patients are perfectly healthy.

Dentists are attracted to quackery because of ego and greed. To be at the “forefront” of your profession can be a powerful motivator. Add to this the tremendous profit generated by health fraud and one could have a severe loss of objectivity.

Greed and gullibility go hand in hand. Fluoridation and the economy have led to a reduced demand for dentistry. This, coupled with advertising, has greatly affected the normal practice of dentistry. Today dentists are greatly concerned about finding new ways of attracting and treating patients. Too many are resorting to questionable, fringe, or even fraudulent treatments as the answer. This allows the practitioner to diagnose disease where none exists and gives him a distinct advertising edge over ethical dentists. Gresham’s Law in economics states that the bad money will force out the good; will the fringe practitioner force out the ethical dentist because in the eyes of the unsophisticated public the dentist who makes outrageous health promises has a competitive advantage?

The public must be made aware of the failures of our educational and health-care systems. The consumer term caveat emptor has never been more valid than when dealing with modern dentistry.