The King of Quacks:
Albert Abrams, M.D.

One of the greatest quacks of all time was Albert Abrams, M.D. Abrams earned the dubious distinction of "the dean of twentieth century charlatans" by the American Medical Association.

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The physician is the most convincing of all quacks. He has both the knowledge and the authority to promote his claims, no matter how outlandish. In the history of physician-quacks, the undisputed king is Dr. Albert Abrams. This Stanford professor was given the dubious distinction as the "dean of twentieth century charlatans," according to the American Medical Association in 1924 (Cramp 1936).

Quack is short for quacksalver, which means one who "quacks," or makes a loud noise, about a remedy, such as a salve (Randi 1995). The requirements for a convincing quack are threefold. First, he must pretend to have knowledge of some remarkable medical remedy. Second, he must
be a convincing liar. And finally, he must have a gullible victim. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "There are no greater liars in the world than quacks—except for their patients" (Randl 1995).

Even though history has revealed multitudes of charlatans, their victims often remain their most ardent supporters. Hope, and the desire to believe, are powerful forces that quacks exploit to great advantage. While many today laugh at those who fell victim to Dr. Abrams's ridiculous methods and treatments, the spirit of his work is still alive and well. The story of how Abrams achieved the title of the dean of American quackery is a fascinating tale.

Abrams began his career in the conventional way, obtaining a medical degree at the early age of twenty from the University of Heidelberg in 1882. He pursued postgraduate studies in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and London before returning to his native San Francisco.

Little is known of his childhood, however E.W. Page wrote in 1939 that Abrams's parents instilled in him a desire to dominate others by intellectual achievement. Abrams came to feel that that he was destined to become a sage, or even a prophet, and to possess both wealth and power (Bailey 1978).

In 1893 Abrams accepted the position of Professor of Pathology at Cooper Medical College, the predecessor of Stanford University. Early in his career, he began writing and publishing on a wide range of medical subjects, including textbooks on clinical diagnosis and cardiology. He also published several collections of essays containing references to quackery.

By 1900, Abrams began to turn increasingly from mainstream medicine to more eccentric beliefs. In rapid succession, he published Nervous Breakdown in 1901, The Blues (Splanchnic Neurasthenia) in 1904, Diseases of the Lungs in 1905, and Man and His Poisons in 1906.

In The Blues, he set forth his theory that neurasthenia (similar to nervous exhaustion) resulted in part from stagnation of the blood in the abdominal veins. Treatment consisted of physical exercise to strengthen the abdominal muscles. He also introduced an apparatus of his own design to accomplish the strengthening, Man and His Poisons contained one of the first electrical devices designed by Abrams to be used in treatment.

But his true break with conventional medicine occurred in 1910 with the publication of Spondylotherapy. He claimed to be able to diagnose and cure disease by a steady, rapid percussing of the spine. The California Medical Society declared the technique "a hybrid of up-stage osteopathy and chiropractic" (Cramp 1936). A review of the technique was critical, but Abrams cleverly twisted the wording to make it an endorsement, which he then featured in advertising. The book was popular with the public, rapidly selling through five printings. Abrams embarked on a lecture tour, charging $200 to teach spondylotherapy to anyone willing to pay the fee.

Several years later, Dr. Morris Fishbein of the American Medical Association wrote, "Apparently having percussed the back to the fullest extent of what it would yield monetarily, Dr. Albert Abrams turned the patient over and began to percuss the abdomen" (Fishbein 1927). His new system, however, was much more complex and capitalized on America's fascination with radio and the invention of new gadgets.

Electricity had provided a tremendous boost to quackery. In the early twentieth century, America became hooked on radio. Abrams pronounced, "The spirit of the age is radio, and we can use radio in diagnosis" (Abrams 1925). In 1917 Abrams published his electronic theory of diseases, called "Electronic Reactions of Abrams," or E.R.A., inaugurating one of the most famous cults of all time.

E.R.A. proposed that the human body possessed a characteristic rate of electronic vibration in health and disease. By measuring altered vibratory rates, the type, severity, and location of any disease could be determined. These vibratory rates were measured by an instrument invented by Abrams, the dynamizer.

By linking the dynamizer to a series of other machines, Abrams claimed he could harness the new force, which would revolutionize the field of diagnostics. The system worked like this: a drop of blood on a piece of paper, a piece of preserved tissue or even a handwriting sample, or photograph from the diseased person was all that was needed to yield a diagnosis.
Each of these samples supposedly possessed the vibratory rate of the diseased person.

The sample was placed in the dynamizer, causing emanations to pass through a series of machines: a rheostat dynamizer, a vibratory rate rheostat, a strain rate rheostat, a measuring rheostat, and finally a proximal electrode. The proximal electrode was connected to the forehead of a healthy subject, called a reagent, who was usually an employee of the laboratory.

Abrams insisted in special conditions to ensure the accuracy of the testing. It was necessary that the room be darkened during testing. It was also imperative that the reagent be facing west, with his feet resting on ground plates and his arms held out to his side to prevent "shorting out." The reagent also had to be first treated with a horseshoe magnet to remove any extraneous vibrations.

The apparatus could be adjusted to various settings corresponding to different diseases. At each setting, the Abrams practitioner would percuss the reagent's abdomen to determine the areas of dullness. By changes in the areas of dullness at different settings, the diagnostician could deduce the diseases affecting the person who provided the sample (Bailey 1978).

Some of the most frequent diseases diagnosed were syphilis (euphemistically called diminished resistance), tuberculosis, and cancer. Many apparently healthy persons were commonly found to have multiple serious ailments. But fortunately for them, the amazing Dr. Abrams had devised a new instrument that could provide a cure, the oscilloclast.

The oscilloclast was simply set to the vibratory rate of the disease to be treated, and a cure would result. The treatment was likened to shattering a wine glass by sound vibrations (Bailey 1978).

E.R.A. was reportedly so sensitive that it not only diagnosed the specific disease, but also the location within the body. The sex of the patient could be determined, and if female, whether or not the patient was pregnant. Most remarkably, the individual's religion could be detected according to areas of abdominal dullness to percussion. In the September 1922 issue of his journal, Physico-Clinical Medicine, Abrams printed a chart showing characteristic areas of abdominal dullness for Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Theosophists, Jews, Protestants, and Methodists.

The popularity of E.R.A. was greatly enhanced by a series of articles in Pearson's Magazine. Well-known author Upton Sinclair became an ardent advocate of E.R.A. after visiting Abrams's laboratory in San Francisco. Sinclair, a socialist and dreamer, was fascinated by Abrams's techniques and easily duped. Scientific American wrote of Sinclair's recommendations: "His name carried a brilliant and convincing story to the masses, who quite overlooked the fact that Sinclair's name meant no more in medical research than Jack Dempsey's would mean on a thesis dealing with the fourth dimension or Babe Ruth's on the mathematical theory of invariance" (Scientific American 1929).

Sinclair, who also believed in psychics and other paranormal phenomena, added E.R.A. to a long succession of fads to which he gave his outspoken allegiance.

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While Abrams sold his diagnostic devices, he would only lease the oscilloclast. In addition to paying a healthy fee ($200 to $250 initially, then $5 per month), the lessee had to agree by contract never to open the apparatus, which was hermetically sealed. Some did, however, and found a weird jumble of ohmmeters, rheostats, condensers, and other parts wired together in an incomprehensible manner.

Physicist Robert Millikan said, "They are the kind of devices a ten-year-old would build to fool an eight-year-old" (Young 1967). Physician Walter Alvarez tracked down the electrician who was producing the oscilloclasts. The electrician shamefully admitted that he was "prostituting" himself, but said the pay was irresistible.

As the popularity of Abrams's method increased, practitioners from all over the country flocked to San Francisco to learn from the master. A four-week course in electronic medicine cost $200. A past president of the British Medical Association, Sir James Barr, was recruited on the continent to help spread the word. E.R.A. even achieved legal standing when a judge accepted Abrams's opinion in a paternity
suit based on the “electronic vibrations” of the alleged father’s blood sample.

It is estimated that 4,000 electronic machines “authorized by Abrams” were manufactured. By mid-1923, more than 3,500 machines were in operation. According to one estimate, less than found the Abrams machines a gold mine, bringing in from $1,000 to $2,000 per week (Holbrook 1959).

E.R.A.’s tide of popularity prompted the American Medical Association and the journal Scientific American to initiate investigations. The Association’s journal concluded, “The absurdity of the E.R.A. was demonstrated at various times by sending some of Abrams’s disciples specimens of blood purported to be from patients who were ill but were actually taken from animals” (Holbrook 1959). One blood sample from a sheep was diagnosed as hereditary syphilis and an E.R.A. practitioner wrote back offering a cure for $250 (Holbrook 1959).

Another sample of sheep’s blood accompanied by the history of a fifteen-year-old boy revealed a diagnosis of congenital syphilis, metastatic carcinoma of the left lung and pancreas, Neisserian infection, and tuberculosis of the genitourinary tract. A cure was offered for $250 (Bailey 1978).

Drops of chicken blood and even red ink were submitted to Abrams’s practitioners, revealing seemingly terminal diagnoses; yet the prognosis was always favorable, if treated with the amazing oscillocast and the accompanying $250 fee.

Scientific American embarked on an ambitious campaign against E.R.A., resulting in a series of twelve articles from October 1923 to September 1924. Scientific American concluded that E.R.A. was the work of a mastermind, writing, “It is far more intricate and ironclad than medical fads of the past. It deals with a new form of energy…” (Scientific American 1929). And, “At best it is an illusion; at worst it is a colossal fraud” (Scientific American 1929).

Writer David M. Bailey explained the E.R.A. phenomenon, “Indeed radio was new and poorly understood by the public. The prospect of using it to diagnose and cure disease in an easy and painless way, without the use of unpleasant drugs or surgery, must have seemed attractive to a gullible public” (Bailey 1978).

Another article said that Abrams’s machines had “forced the chiropractors to bring out their piece of mechanical hocus, the Neurocalometer, in order to meet the competition of the osteopaths with their Oscillocasts and other Abrams magic boxes” (Cramp 1936).

Dr. Abrams died suddenly from pneumonia at age sixty in 1924, just as serious doubts about his methods were becoming widespread. At the time of his death, Abrams’s estate amounted to over $2 million, a testament to the gullibility of the public and the greed of those who should have known better. James Young said this about the gadget boom in quackery:

Device quackery preyed upon the same widespread credulity, fear, and desperation which permitted all other forms of quackery to flourish. Gadgets could possess certain kinds of persuasiveness denied to drugs. One was the power to shock. A New York “clinic” early in this century treated young men who were led to believe they might be suffering from syphilis or the dire consequences of self-abuse. The patient sat naked on a sort of toilet throne, his bare back resting against a metal plate, his scrotum suspended in a whirling pool. The plate and pool were linked by wire to a battery. No frightened sufferer could question the rigor of the therapy (Young 1967).

Quacks had good success in promoting their devices as drugless forms of therapy. The public was well aware of the many side effects, sometimes fatal, due to some pharmaceuticals. In his book The Golden Age of Quackery, Stewart Holbrook summed up the history of device quackery as follows:

One would like to know what became of all that imposing mass of machinery. I like to think that, somewhere or other, in the attic of a house that has belonged to four or five generations of a dedicated fiddish family, there is grouped a now dusty and rusting display of the mechanical nostrums which, periodically over the years, have brought temporary comfort and hope to their users.

In this museum of obsolete therapy the oldest exhibit would of course be a pair of Dr. Perkins’s Metallic Tractors; and surely one of Dr. Raphael’s Famous Electro-magnetism Claims, “endorsed by Prince Albert of England.” There must be a collection of the patented works of Dr. Hercules Sanchez, the Discoverer of the Laws of the Spontaneous Cures of Disease, which began with his basic Oxydonor, and flowered into the elaborate attachments known as the Animator, the Novora, the Binora and the Vocabor. There would have to be a copy of Dr. Charles A. Tyrell’s J. B. L. Cascade, The Internal Bath of the Continuous Good Health; and perhaps several unmentionable devices, patented or otherwise, which had come in Plain Sealed Wrappers from mail-order houses with names like the Ponce de Leon Appliance Company.

Then within reach of an electric socket would stand the wonderful showcase of Dr. Abrams, a complete Electronic Assembly, its levers, buttons, and flashing lights reminding one today less of therapy than of a small size computer…” (Holbrook 1959).

Even with such colossal frauds as E.R.A., the public continues to fall prey to new forms of quackery. Magician and debunker James Randi has said that the climate for quacks has never been better in the United States. “Political and legal considerations,” says Randi, “have prevented open discussion or even questioning of procedures that are clearly without merit. The highly litigious nature of American society has effectively provided the quacks with protection, and the public suffer because it cannot afford to defend itself and politicians for censure” (Randi 1995).

As the old saying goes, if it sounds to good to be true, it probably is.

References
The editors. 1929. Scientific American, 131, 96.