



# Doctor Abrams- Dean of Machine Quacks

by JACK KAPLAN

■ **NOT LONG AGO**, a self-styled "medical missionary" named David Aitchison mailed a piece of blotting paper to Mrs. E. L. Wickman of West Palm Beach, Florida. On it she was to deposit a drop of her blood which Aitchison would have diagnosed in California by a fake health device known as the Drown Diagnosing Instrument. The "missionary" assured Mrs. Wickman that this procedure would confirm his own diagnosis that she had cancer—not that this was so bad, for was not the Drown device capable of broadcasting "healing waves" to cure her disease by remote control?

David Aitchison, 77, holder of a long record of convictions for practicing medicine illegally, was subsequently convicted of violations of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act in this case and others, and in April 1965, in Baltimore was sentenced by Federal Judge Edward S. Northrup to three years in prison.

In pronouncing sentence, the judge told the charlatan: "You prey upon pathetic people who cannot reason properly. Your treatment does more harm than good." For Mrs. Wickman these words proved too true. She died in the late summer of 1964—one more victim lured away from legitimate medical treatment by a "machine quack."

More recently—in September 1965—two chiropractors in Windom, Minnesota, were forced by the Food and

Drug Administration to destroy three useless "electrotherapy machines" with which they had gulled 1000 patients over a period of 30 years.

And in Nampa, Idaho, during that same year, a 78-year-old osteopath was charged with mail fraud for the sale to ailing people in the area of 300 fake electrical health machines that he had built. (He was freed by a judge who agreed with the FDA, the Post Office Department, and the Idaho Osteopathic Association that the \$197.50 device was worthless—but who could not find "necessary degree of criminal intent.")

These cases point up the fact that the heritage of Dr. Albert Abrams—the founder of the bogus electrotherapy cult—is still too much with us. Scores of Abrams machine gadgeteers are active today, producing fake health devices and treating innocents like Mrs. Wickman or distributing them to fellow quacks who purport to tune in on human organs, diagnose human diseases through electronic radiation or vibration, and cure them by similar means. That is why Dr. K.L. Milstead—special assistant to the commissioner of the FDA—tells you:

"Quack devices of the fake electrotherapy category—that is, of the Abrams, Ellis, and Drown types—are a continuing menace to the health and welfare of the American public. It is still



necessary—in spite of our extensive policing of this problem, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of these devices—to bear down hard on this recurring health fraud.”

... *this recurring health fraud!*

Consider that the Abrams electronics humbuggery has been with us now for practically a half-century—a melancholy record which makes the quackery of Albert Abrams the most enduring of today's medical cults.

And consider that many of the chief cultists of modern quackdom—for example, William Reich, William Estep, Dinshah Ghadiali—have used Abrams-inspired device quackery to entrap their followers. Small wonder, then, that Doctor Abrams has won acknowledgement as the greatest of modern quacks.

How does a Doctor Abrams, a man with a one-time respectable status in the medical profession, leap across the Great Divide separating science and quackery to achieve such a notorious position?

The answer—in Abrams' case—was an overwhelming ambition to dominate the world of men in some outstanding way. This was the power behind the personality of Albert Abrams, shaping both his formative and later years and motivating his cultism.

Albert was excessively introverted as a boy in San Francisco, preferring the company of his books to that of any other comrades. Observing that young Albert was decidedly precocious, his middle-class parents encouraged their son's intellectual bent, impressing him with their belief that intellectual supremacy was a good medium for forging ahead. But the son's ambitions far exceeded that of his parents. As he stressed in his early letters, he desired to become a prophet among men—a sage acquiring both *wealth* and *power*.

Certainly, it did seem that he had achieved his first step toward great achievement when he obtained his medical sheepskin from the University of Heidelberg in 1882—an unusual accomplishment for a boy of 18. And his profoundly ambitious drive motivated him to take postgraduate courses from Berlin, Vienna, London, and Paris—and,

when he was back in America in San Francisco, an LL.D from an undisclosed professional school—plus an A.M. from the now-defunct University of Portland. Why this further grazing in non-medical educational pastures? Apparently, Doctor Abrams believed—like Doctor Faust—that knowledge paves the way to power and greatness.

Armed with impressive educational credentials, Abrams chose to storm the heavens through writing and the practice of his profession. For the one, he poured out an avalanche of highly regarded medical text books and articles that were belles-lettres with a medical accent. For the other, he built a progressively larger practice.

By the time he resigned his post of professor of pathology and director of the medical clinic at Cooper Medical College—in which capacities he served from 1893 to 1898—he had achieved considerable prestige in both medical and non-medical circles around San Francisco. Not only had he served as president and vice president of several medical societies, but he was a favorite of the San Francisco fashionable set.

For most men, the success which Doctor Abrams had attained at this point might have sufficed. But it was not enough for this man beset by megalomaniacal impulses. Although he enjoyed his renown in San Francisco, he felt it was inadequate. And, yes, he was comfortably well off, but he was far from wealthy. (As one of his admirers, Alexander Marky, was to observe, Albert Abrams was money-mad all his life.) Most significantly, although he had written a few textbooks and about 500 articles, he had not startled the medical world with any revolutionary discoveries.

Having determined that this was the best means, after all, of scaling the Promethean heights, Doctor Abrams founded a new medical system which he claimed would correct functional disorders by the excitation of the functional centers of the spinal cord. The year 1910 saw him gathering all his writings on scientifically questionable subjects and throwing in a hodge-podge of Abrams-discovered “reflexes” of doubtful origin, some chiropractic mish-

mash, and fantastic diagrams and photographs. Coining the word “spondylotherapy” to describe his system, Abrams published a book under that title.

Nor did it matter to him that the California Medical Society and other medical groups condemned his book as “a hybrid of up-stage osteopathy and chiropractic.” For — at long last — Abrams was a countrywide sensation. His book went through five printings, being hailed by cranks and quacks, as well as—sad to say—by some persons who could not understand Abrams' muddled presentation of his medical system, but who could readily apply his teaching about the technique of percussing (tapping) the spine.

Abrams rushed, pell-mell, to exploit his idea by giving courses in spondylotherapy for a fee of \$200. To be sure, it was no accident that an American Association for the Study of Spondylotherapy sprang into being with Doctor Abrams as president. So was born a prophet with a new medical cult.

But—like many of the titans of medical humbuggery—Abrams soon discovered that his disciples had caught on much too quickly to his theory of spondylotherapy. Result? Too many of the followers were aping the master, successfully competing with him among the nation's fringe health practitioners. What to do, with the fortunes of his cult ebbing markedly? Abrams searched desperately during the first couple of years of World War I for new theories to shake the healing world.

In the two closely related fields of radio and electronics—mysterious to the lay public—Abrams found his new cultist idea, calling it the “Electronic Reactions of Abrams” (ERA). And, in 1916, he published a book titled *New Concepts of Diagnosis and Treatment* in which he promoted electronic diagnosis and treatment—elaborating on ERA in his magazine, *Physico-Clinical Medicine*, founded to publicize the new electronics therapy.

All matter, explained Doctor Abrams, consists of electrical charges in vibration, a phenomenon known to physicists as electrons. No scientist would dispute this contention. *But from this point Abrams went on to argue that*



*electrons and not the cell form the real basis of life. Therefore, Abrams could explain the mysteries of disease by his own discoveries relating to electrons. He claimed that he could demonstrate that the electrons in all of us vibrate at a definite rate in every disease.* By using the human body as an indicator, Abrams emphasized, he could, by tapping upon the abdomen, determine the effects of the villainous vibrations causing disease.

Nor did the patient have to be present; a proxy would do as well, provided that a drop of blood from the patient was placed in the Abrams diagnostic machine. This "dyanamizer" held a veritable jungle of wires, one of which was attached to a source of electricity and threaded from the first part of the machine to a series of coils ending in an electrode, which was held to the forehead of the proxy patient. And for reasons never made clear by Doctor Abrams, the proxy had to face west.

The mysterious energy of the machine, transmitting the vibrations from the original sample of the blood, passed from the proxy's forehead to his lower regions. Then Doctor Abrams tapped on the proxy's abdomen, thereby ascertaining his diagnosis of the patient whose blood sample was in the machine.

With all these miracles of diagnosis achieved, the pertinent question, of course, was: How were people to be cured? Doctor Abrams' answer was to invent the "Oscilloclast"—his cure-all gadget, by far the masterpiece of his many health-machine devices.

The Oscilloclast—a sealed box housing a rheostat, a condenser, an ohmmeter, and other wired-together parts—was "an apparatus for treating disease by definite rates of vibration," Doctor Abrams claimed. He maintained that since every disease has its own vibratory rate, by matching the disease frequency with the Oscilloclast, you cancel out—destroy—the disease.

Eureka! Our hero had finally done it: It was not merely that Doctor Abrams had introduced a new magic box now curing ailments through a sort of scientific shimmy. Rather, it was that ERA now offered a complete

system of diagnosis and cure—one that completely eliminated orthodox drugs forever.

Truly, it looked as if the Age of Abrams had arrived to usher in the medical millenium. For ERA—later dubbed "radionics"—caught on as no other modern quack cult ever had. In part, this popularity stemmed from the ability of the prophet to feed the nation's daily press and magazines—which were giving Abrams the biggest build-up ever enjoyed by a controversial American "healer"—sensational material, proclaiming more and more powers for ERA and his machines.

Next, Abrams was reporting he could ascertain the diseases of a living or dead person by substituting the latter's *autograph* for a drop of blood in his machines. By this means he "discovered" that Dr. Samuel Johnson, Edgar Allen Poe, Samuel Pepys, and even pious Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had suffered from syphilis.

Moreover, Doctor Abrams then asserted that he could diagnose, from a person's blood sample or handwriting in his devices, that individual's age, character, sex, location, religion, beliefs, and emotions. For example, he said he could come up with this analysis about a patient: "This man has a gumboil on his left jaw. He splits his ticket when he votes. He would like to join the Ku Klux Klan. He is a Methodist and is unromantic. He lives on Main Street, reads detective stories, and bets on the races. And his favorite dessert is chocolate eclair."

Contributing to the shaping of the Abrams image, some literary figures—notably, Upton Sinclair, the novelist, and Alexander Marky, the managing editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, which published a special supplement calling for the recognition of Abrams' medical genius—jumped on the wizard's bandwagon. Sinclair engaged in a running battle with Henry Mencken, Paul DeKruif, and the American Medical Association—all of whom remained frankly skeptical about the San Francisco wonderman.

For the public at large, however, the dissenting voices were snowed under by the favorable hoopla about Abrams.

Between the end of World War I and the demise of the prophet in 1924, ERA became famous in America, and burned in electric lights in London as a symbol of its fame abroad.

Since Doctor Abrams was no man to ignore the golden goose of quackery, he showed even more ability to exploit his medical cult for personal profit than he had with his spondylotherapy. Drops of blood on blotters—enclosed with \$10 checks—poured in to him by the thousands. And although in 1919 only five people were listed as using Abrams' machines, by the fall of 1922 there were some 3500 ERA practitioners, the largest proportion of them springing from the borderline elements of the healing arts. All of these disciples were proud graduates of the new medical Mecca—Abrams' stone mansion on San Francisco's Sacramento Street—where the master taught courses in ERA.

Once these devotees had completed their training in "electronic medicine," they were privileged—since the Oscilloclast was definitely not for sale—to rent the instrument from Doctor Abrams, fees \$200 down and \$5 a month, for their own practice. Those who rented the instrument had to sign a contract not to open the closed apparatus.

Obviously, the prophet—with the money pouring in from his diagnosis of blood samples and his lucrative income from device rentals—was becoming increasingly richer, fabulously so. And his followers were reported, by no less an authority than Upton Sinclair, as realizing enormous sums—\$1000 to \$2000 a week—from the use of Abrams' leased magic boxes.

Inevitably, the chief supporters of the Abrams cult joined the wizard in accusing the medical profession of a sinister conspiracy to suppress his work. Certainly, this charge—the stock libel of quacks—is hardly borne out by the record. Time and again, the medical profession offered Abrams the opportunity to submit to a test of the diagnosis of patients with definite ailments.

Typically, Doctors Hyman and Reed—prominent physicians in California—outlined to Doctor Abrams the means



of a full-scale scientific test of his electronic diagnostic theories: They offered to furnish him with the blood specimens of 200 diseased patients from the University of California and Stanford University clinics. With the blood, Doctor Abrams was to be provided with the clinic number of the patients and to have access to both the patients and their records right after he made his diagnosis in writing.

Doctor Abrams flatly refused to cooperate in this investigation, just as he rejected many other similar confrontations. Abrams liked to compare himself with Pasteur. Pasteur accepted the challenge of science. Abrams did not.

But the case of science against him proved itself with accelerating momentum. For one thing, hundreds of patients treated by ERA methods for one disease were found to have another. Again, many patients were found to have no disease, although an ERA practitioner stated that they did. On one occasion five young men were diagnosed by ERA technique as having syphilis (one of Doctor Abrams' wildcat theories was that syphilis was the basic or primary disease from which other diseases spring) only to be found by competent physicians to be completely healthy.

And then came the instances of mistaken identity: A Chensaning, Michigan, physician, for example, requested that Doctor Abrams make a diagnosis of a drop of blood on blotting paper sent by post. Doctor Abrams diagnosed the patient as having diabetes, malaria, cancer, and syphilis. The blood sample he had sent in—the Michigan doctor revealed—was that of a young Plymouth Rock rooster whose virtue was unimpeachable since it had never left its cage since birth.

When other doctors sent in the blood of a guinea pig, only to have it diagnosed by ERA practitioners as being that of humans with cancer and tuberculosis of the genito-urinary tract—any further exposure of the Abrams' methods seemed unnecessary.

But the *Scientific American*, joining with the American Medical Association, spent some \$30,000 investigating Abrams' devices over a period of 10

months, extending from 1923 well into 1924. The conclusion of the distinguished panel of investigating scientists: "Analyzed in the cold light of scientific knowledge, the entire Abrams matter is the height of absurdity . . . The so-called Electronic Reactions of Abrams do not exist . . . at least objectively. They are merely products of the Abrams' practitioner's mind . . . At best it is all an illusion. At worst, it is a colossal fraud."

Certainly, the exposure of his pseudoscience did not stop Abrams from continuing with ERA. What did stop him was pneumonia. All of Abrams' devices proved ineffectual in curing him of it—just as they had been unable to cure both his wives of their cancers—and he passed this life in January 1924.

But he did not die before he had willed his millions—the *Scientific American* estimated that he had grossed between two and five million dollars with his charlatanism—to a foundation for the perpetuation of his fake health machines. Indeed, this act has caused many people to argue that Doctor Abrams believed in his theories. Many contemporaries—people as critical of him as DeKruif and as adulatory as Upton Sinclair—have testified to this end.

If that is so, then the conclusion is inescapable that Abrams—like Dr. Wilhelm Reich, that other aristocrat of quackery—was a paranoid, a man deluding himself, abnormally as it were, as to the scientific worth of his ideas.

Usually, the death of its all-powerful leader spells the finish of a medical cult. Quite the contrary with Abramism! Since the king's death, literally thousands of Abrams-type operators like David Aitchison and the Nampa, Idaho, practitioner have been victimizing gullibles. Calling themselves mechanotherapists, electrotherapists, sanipractors, naturopaths, and by other titles (also, some have been chiropractors), they have been supplied with their fake diagnostic and treatment gadgets by several competing firms.

The most prominent of these companies have been the Electronic Medical Foundation of San Francisco; the Electronic Instrument, Inc., and the

International Electronic Research Foundation—both of Tiffin, Ohio; the Ellis Research Laboratories, Inc., of Chicago; and Ruth Drown of Los Angeles.

Under their hard-sell promotions carried out under pretensions that made the firms sound like legitimate medical research organizations, the array of Abrams-type devices grew and grew. So these promoters have offered, cumulatively, 28 varieties of gadgets—many of them duplicates of their competitors' devices—for their quack trade, virtually all of the devices operating on the fantastic radionics Abrams' system. Most are or have been mechanical gadgets equipped with eye-catching lights, noises, and assorted dials and meters and intended for false representations that they can diagnose or cure disease.

Consider the magnitude of the Abrams operation: The Electronic Medical Foundation marketed some 5000 of its gadgets, and several competitors sold similar totals of their devices to drugless healers and patients. Realize that each device quack is responsible for the mistreatment of hundreds if not thousands of patients. Then only will you have some glimpse of the firm hold that the Abrams quackery has held—and still holds—over hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Your money! That's the target for these current Doctor Frauds. For example, a Cleveland dress proprietor shelled out \$1020 to a masseur for treatments by him with two fake health machines—the Radioclast and the Diagonometer. FDA officials recently cited the case of a person suffering from a nervous ailment who paid \$28,600 for treatments with a worthless machine.

The tragedy is that the current machine quacks cause far more than just expense. In such diseases as cancer, tuberculosis, and heart disease, early diagnosis and treatment are so vital that the waste of time by the patient with Doctor Fraud's gadgets can produce agony and death. Mrs. Wickman's death, mentioned at the start of this article, testifies to this somber truth. And there was the case of Doris Hull, suffering from tuberculosis, who was taken by her husband to see Otis C. Carroll, sanipractor—a licensed drugless



healer—in Spokane, Washington. Carroll diagnosed Mrs. Hull by taking a drop of blood from her ear and putting it on his radionic machine and twirling some knobs (fee \$50).

His prescriptions: hot and cold compresses to increase her absorption of water. Although she weighed only 108 pounds when she visited him, Carroll permitted her to go on a 19-day fast during which she took nothing but water. Inevitably, Mrs. Hull died of starvation and tuberculosis, weighing 60 pounds. Moreover, her husband and child contracted tuberculosis from her. (Small wonder a Spokane jury awarded the husband \$33,623 for his wife's death.)

"More Americans are killed by quacks than by all forms of criminal deaths," says John Miner, Los Angeles deputy district attorney, who has prosecuted several machine quacks. The death certificates of thousands upon thousands of Mrs. Wickmans and Mrs. Hulls offer grim confirmation of Miner's castigation of the evil that the machine quacks do by delaying ethical medical care until their patients reach the deadly point of no return.

Shouldn't somebody—the FDA, for instance—do something about these dangerous gadgeteers?

The FDA has done plenty—particularly in the last several years—to shear off the tentacles of the fake health-machine octopus. It secured permanent injunctions against the Electronic Medical Foundation, the Electronic Instrument, Inc., and the International Research Society, Inc. It conducted "Operation Abrams Machine" in the spring and summer of 1962, which resulted in the destruction of thousands of phony diagnostic and treatment devices.

Why, then, in view of these operations, do FDA officials still say that much—a great deal—must still be done to clear up the Abrams gadget menace to public health?

A look at the activities of the Electronic Medical Foundation can supply the answer to this last question. From 1924, this organization—nominally the inheritor of the Abrams' mantle—promoted and distributed 13 different fake health machines of the Abrams vintage,

with such names as Depoloray, Depolatron, Oscilloclast, and Electropad. In 1958, the FDA secured a permanent injunction against the shipping of the gadgets in interstate commerce. And the FDA showed that the devices dispensed ridiculous diagnoses.

At the end of 1961, the FDA announced a criminal contempt action against the Foundation and Fred J. Hart, its president, charging that the Foundation and Hart had sold an Oscilloclast across state lines, thereby violating the permanent court prohibition against distribution of the organization's devices. Hart pleaded no contest and was fined \$500 for his offense. Hart fairly recently declared the Electronic Medical Foundation dissolved. But many Foundation devices may still be in use.

As in the case of the Foundation, other phony devices put out by other segments of the Abrams cult—even those under permanent injunction—are still in widespread use among health practitioners. Electronic Instrument, Inc., for example, produced seven types of "expensive (up to \$1000) but worthless" machines with such imposing names as Nurolinometer, Radioclast, and Electron-O-Ray.

Probably, the FDA's greatest success in stirring up a national campaign against a fake electrical device was that against the Ellis Micro-Dynamometer—a simple galvanometer for measuring minute electrical impulses and used mostly by chiropractors for diagnosing their patients' ills. While the patient holds the two electrodes, the practitioner manipulates a couple of knobs and comes up with a diagnosis.

But the FDA proved in court that the only condition actually measured by the machine was "the amount of perspiration on the skin of a patient." Moreover, it also showed that the Micro-Dynamometer could not tell the difference between a cadaver and a living body.

The FDA stopped the legal distribution of the device when the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in March 1962, that the "Micro-Dynamometer is not safe for use even in the hands of a licensed practitioner." With this decision—an

historic one—the agency worked up a nationally publicized campaign which resulted in elimination of some 1000 Micro-Dynameters from use, but 5000 of these machines were known to have been distributed.

Although the FDA has weakened some links of the Abrams machine network, these health-machine charlatans still persist. Why? For one thing, federal laws provide only a year in jail and a \$1000 fine for initial offenders in machine quackery—hardly a strong deterrent considering the potential loot.

For another thing, says FDA, state agencies charged with the licensing of health practitioners have not removed fake health machines. Many states do not have effective legislation which can be brought to bear against the Abrams people. An exception is California, which has taken positive action against device quackery, such as the action which put the Ruth Drown outfit out of business.

Chiropractor Ruth B. Drown—whose services Aitchison employed in the case of Mrs. Wickman—reportedly treated some 35,000 patients, taking them for more than a half million dollars. Huckstering her Abrams-type devices—the Drown Radio Therapeutic Instrument, the Drown Radio Vision Instrument, the Homo-Vibra-Ray-Instrument—Mrs. Drown claimed that her instruments could make blood counts, take temperatures, diagnose illnesses, and treat ailments. A drop of blood, said she, gives off radiations which can be tuned in by her instruments and, as a result of specific settings of dial, indicate an ailment.

By maintaining files of the blood samples of her patients, Mrs. Drown alleged she could tune in on patients and broadcast healing rays to them even if they were thousands of miles away. When, for example, the late Tyrone Power and his wife had an automobile accident in Italy a few years ago, Mrs. Drown treated them from California by mysterious vibrations from her machine.

In 1949, Mrs. Drown was successfully prosecuted under federal law for the sale of one of her instruments to a Mr. and Mrs. Rice under circum-



stances which clearly led to Mrs. Rice's tragic death from cancer as a result of her relying on the gadget. The cultist was found guilty and fined \$1000.

Obviously, however, she and her many disciples did not cease their activities. So the California State Bureau of Food and Drug Inspections secured a Los Angeles County indictment on October 9, 1963, against Mrs. Drown, her daughter, and four aides, "charging them with grand theft in diagnosing and treating patients for non-existent diseases with worthless electric devices."

To get the evidence, the California authorities used a young housewife, Mrs. Metcalf, as a temporary undercover agent. Mrs. Metcalf sent in the blood sample of a turkey, labeling it that of her daughter. Mrs. Drown's answer: The girl had chicken pox and mumps. When Mrs. Metcalf visited Mrs. Drown with a photographer, the quack attached the latter to one of her machines and diagnosed him as having aluminum poisoning, an infected small intestine, and a floating kidney. But the photographer had just been checked by competent physicians and knew there was nothing wrong with him.

Like others before her, Mrs. Drown indicated that the indictment would not stop her from continuing with her device charlatany: "The advertising will be wonderful for me. When I get back to my office, I'll have more patients than ever," she announced. But Mrs. Drown died on February 12, 1965, before she was brought to trial, and the California authorities simply proceeded with the prosecution of her associates.

As the Drown case shows, legal action against many device quacks is slow—far too slow. Dr. Albert Holland, Jr., former medical director of the FDA, says: "A study of some 500 devices since 1938 shows that most of the violations do not come to the attention of the FDA until months or years have elapsed, during which time the swindle flourished to the detriment of the public health and pocketbook."

Considering the slow process of legal action, it is necessary for you to be acutely aware of the threat to your health posed by fake health devices.

As the FDA currently warns us all: "One of the biggest and most dangerous health swindles is the mechanical or electrical gadget that is supposed to tell what disease a person has and how to treat it. Thousands of such machines . . . are in use by various kinds of health practitioners . . ."

You and I can protect ourselves against the Abrams fake-machine fraudsters: We can, before we seek examination or treatment, check through county medical societies on those whom we want to treat us. You and I should check with our family doctor before using any health gadgets. *Remember that there is no device or machine a patient can use in his home to treat the underlying cause of any disease.* And if you suspect you're being victimized through the use of devices, you should communicate with the nearest FDA office, giving authorities all pertinent data.

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