

SEEING THROUGH THE HYPE

From the Every Victory Counts® Manual

The following tips deal with hype—exaggerated and often misleading claims meant to sell a product, or in the case of news media, to attract readers and advertisers.



#1 - The “information” provided is tied to selling a product.

Many websites, videos, and books appear to offer information about a disease or health topic important to you. However, once you get past the headline, you find yourself immersed in an infomercial for a particular product, diet, or expert. When evaluating healthcare products, you should always ask yourself: what does the person recommending it have to gain by me doing this therapy? A common goal of bullshit is not to cure your illness but to get your money. This may occur by selling you books, supplements, tests, procedures, medications, stem cells, news, or an expert who wants to launch their medical celebrity career.

#2 - The promotions use terms like “revolutionary,” “unbelievable,” or “miracle.”

Certain words should always set off your bullshit detector. Unfortunately, these terms are used to sell products; the media also use them to make their news stories sound exciting. News stories on medical advances are often overblown hype—compare how often you have heard a story headline like “scientists at the University of Smartsville may have discovered a cure for cancer”? (hint—a lot) vs. how often has a cure for all cancer been discovered (hint—never). Granted, some therapies truly are revolutionary. Some examples include penicillin, anesthesia, and handwashing. But, as you might expect, truly revolutionary ideas do not come along every day.

#3 - Initial findings are sent directly to the press without attempts at validation.

If you look back at medicine’s history, many of our most significant discoveries came from chance observation or accidents. However, a core principle of science is validation - one must replicate and test initial observations before we can trust them. For example, in the late 1700s, Edward Jenner noted that milkmaids appeared protected from smallpox. Rather than publish a book about the Dairy Lifestyle or selling udder balm, he did two important things. First, he continued his observations until he recognized that cowpox exposure might be the key to preventing smallpox. Second, he and others carefully tested this hypothesis. In contrast, many

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would-be medical saviors today never test their initial observations, much less carefully validate them, before trying to take them to the press and market.

#4 - Promotions use more resources on marketing than on validating its safety or effectiveness.

When one sees a frantic amount of energy and resources being used to promote a product, it often indicates an underlying lack of confidence in that product to sell itself. Often this advertising focuses on what life will be like with this product (relaxing on a beach, going to a party with beautiful friends) and not on the product itself. This is true not just for alternative medicines and supplements but prescription medications. Pharmaceutical companies have huge advertising budgets that target both consumers and physicians. For products that serve a unique need and work, they may not need to spend much money. But for products with cheaper alternatives or a need to manufacture demand, there is a greater motivation to advertise.^{8, 9} There have been tragic examples of heavily advertised products that later turned out to have serious safety issues, possibly known but suppressed by the company.^{10, 11, 12, 13}

#5 - The claims are inconsistent with what you know from reputable sources.

If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. If you stop to think about it, curing Alzheimer's would be a significant medical advance that would land one or more people a Nobel Prize. To cure Alzheimer's, one would have to a) find a therapy that cures the disease and b) test it to make sure that it is safe and reliably works. It would also help to understand what causes Alzheimer's, although one might find a cure through sheer blind luck. Given the vast amounts of research done by teams worldwide to understand and cure Alzheimer's, it seems highly unlikely that a lone individual would stumble upon it by chance or genius.

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#6 - The promotion relies heavily on celebrities and celebrity experts.

Here is a general rule of thumb that applies to medical bullshit: when you lack substance, it helps to dress fancy and surround yourself with famous people. When it comes to putting things in your body that are meant to improve your health but could harm you, it often comes down to who the discoverer knows or can get to endorse their product. When it comes to science, the value of a famous person's opinion is a piece of data just like any other piece of data from a single subject—nearly worthless. Even true medical experts' views are not valued as highly by scientists as a well-conducted experiment in hundreds of people. An excess of famous people should clue you in to see if there is a lack of data.

#7 - The amazing findings are not cited or found outside of the product or expert's website.

Another crucial question: are there any independent sources also promoting this product? If not, you should probably move on. One of the principles of science is that facts can and should be independently verified. People who care about the truth want to see verification. People who want to sell you bullshit or have something to hide don't want their claims tested.

#8 - The promotion reports research studies but neglects to share the details of that research.

This happens most often with news stories. The headline reads, “Researchers at the Genius College Discover Cure for Parkinson's.” When you read the full story (or go beyond the story to find the source of the article), you are very likely to run into one of the following scenarios:

- The research was performed on animals,
- The research is based on an observational study that found a correlation, and
- The research is a preliminary and small trial with no control group.

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The bottom line is that none of these pieces of evidence are enough by themselves to conclude that something is safe and effective in people. The history of science is filled with examples of:

- Animal studies that found a cure for Parkinson's that never made it to people,
- Correlational studies that found something in the diet associated with lower risks of
- Parkinson's that failed to show benefit in clinical trials, and
- Small clinical trials, sometimes of very fancy treatments like stem cells and gene therapy, that were proven to be placebo effects.

SPOTTING UNRELIABLE EXPERTS

While it's true that you can't judge a book by its cover, you can often learn a lot by looking at its author. In the case of medical bullshit—whether that be a best-selling book, a “miracle supplement,” or a “revolutionary new theory on health”—a careful glance at the person's real accomplishments and actions behind the message should, in many cases, put you on your guard. You will be surprised to see how often self-proclaimed experts have no actual claim to expertise. As you develop a nose for bullshit, you will find that simply the name of certain self-proclaimed experts may be enough to turn you away.

#1 - The expert calls themselves “a leading medical expert” or is endorsed by other “medical opinion leaders.”

I have seen some of the world's most outstanding researchers speak, including several Nobel Prize winners. Many of these individuals truly needed no introduction because their work was so well known. However, they still got introduced. And when they did, the introducer listed their impressive accomplishments, things like their significant discoveries, illnesses they cured, people they trained, critical new ideas. None of them were introduced as, or called themselves, a “health expert,” nor did they list a bunch of bestselling diet books, Oprah appearances, or drop names of other medical (or nonmedical) celebrities who they are friends with to support their credentials. If you pay attention to how experts are selling themselves, ask yourself, “Does this really matter?” Does writing a best-selling book prove you know what you are talking about?

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#2 - The expert does not have the correct credentials.

Medical bullshit experts flaunt any credentials they have—diplomas, certificates, awards, publications—prominently on their website, flyers, books, and office walls. Having too many credentials may even be a clue to something amiss. Often a careful look will reveal that the credentials on display are not the credentials needed to claim expertise in a field. Some common examples include:

- Having training in one field and claiming expertise in another (e.g., a surgeon who writes a book on nutrition)
- Doing research in one field and claiming expertise in another (e.g., a physicist promoting stem cells)
- Highlighting the fancy school one went to but not what was studied (e.g., a Lyme Disease author who highlights they are a Harvard graduate but neglects to mention that they majored in English)
- Having a degree in a field you've never heard of or from a school you've never heard of (this, of course, could be just your lack of familiarity with a legitimate field or school, but it would be worth looking up)
- Buying or simply fabricating a fake degree

#3 - The expert brags about being rejected by the mainstream medical establishment.

The idea that there is a monolithic entity, “the medical establishment,” is appealing to some people, but what does this really mean? If one is talking about the culture of medicine, there may be some interesting things to say about how healthcare professionals act or what they believe in different contexts. However, suppose one is claiming that ALL physicians, researchers, hospitals, or insurance companies get together to make collective decisions, particularly against a specific individual. In that case, that is simply creating conspiracies as a branding strategy. Don't be fooled. It is next to impossible to get healthcare professionals to agree on almost anything.

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#4 - The expert tells you that their ideas or your diagnosis are “too complicated” to understand.

If you can't convince them, confuse them. When a so-called expert doesn't have evidence to support their claims, they often present some vague and fancy-sounding ideas and then add that the details are too complicated for any but the most brilliant experts to understand. They hope that people will just take their word for it rather than press for details. This goes with the notion that experts know things not just that most people don't know but that most people can't know. Pretending that one holds ideas that can't be understood or shared with others is akin to modern-day witchcraft.

Real experts do society a disservice by not treating the person in front of them with respect and explaining things so they can understand. Some experts have a difficult time writing or speaking clearly. Some are purposefully trying to hide weak points in their research. And some may enjoy the power of being an unchallenged expert. None of these are good reasons not to explain ideas clearly.

Regardless of the reasons for not being clear, the result is the same—a claim to unjustified power for those in the Expertocracy that reinforces a message of helplessness for everyone else. Granted, certain things do require specialized knowledge. I don't understand the complex biochemistry and pharmacodynamics of many of the medications I prescribe. But I understand other essential things about them—the symptoms they treat, what dose to use, and what side effects to watch out for. Similarly, my patients don't need to know all the medical science underlying their symptoms (although I would be happy to share what I know if they are interested), but they should understand what treatments are available to manage their symptoms, how those symptoms may affect their lives, and how to plan for the future. I feel the mark of a true expert is someone who can clearly explain what needs to be known. As Albert Einstein said: “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.”

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#5 - The expert actively encourages fear.

Fear sells. Richard Leask, a representative of the California Chamber of Commerce, said, “if you can’t convince ‘em, confuse ‘em: if you can’t confuse ‘em, scare ‘em.” As a healthcare provider, I do my best to balance being realistic with compassion. If I have bad news for someone, for example, that their disease is progressing rapidly, I have a conversation with them about it. They tell me what they want to hear, and I do my best to provide them with the information they need to make the best decisions possible. I also check in with them about difficult emotions, like fear or grief, and explore whether there may still be opportunities for meaning, connection, or joy. In contrast, the bullshit artist will focus on the worst, will fan the flames of your fear (often while pretending to offer understanding), and will lead you towards the one best choice for someone in your situation, which, coincidentally, happens to be what they are selling.

#6 - The expert is not part of a regulated or established profession or clinic.

Like medicine, counseling, or acupuncture, many professions have state boards that regulate the profession and handle licensing and testing. It is never a good sign when an expert dismisses these regulations. Sometimes the person behind the product introduces himself as a physician, which in the setting of healthcare implies a medical physician, but they really hold a physicianate in another field, perhaps philosophy or business. A somewhat newer phenomenon is a medical physician embracing a new branch of medicine (e.g., Functional Medicine, Alternative Neurologist) that does not have established training requirements. As with most of these clues, this doesn’t automatically mean this person is a quack—some have taken a thoughtful approach to integrate alternative treatments, exercise, and nutritional choices with traditional Western medicine. However, many times they cross the line from a balanced approach to feigning knowledge or expertise that does not exist and is a harmful deviation from standard practice.

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#7 - The expert doesn't take time to listen to you or examine you fully.

This comes up in two contexts. First, someone with the goal of selling you a product lets you talk, but only up to the point where they feel they have the information they need to move forward with their sale. Sometimes this can be subtle. The expert pretends to listen to you, to “understand exactly what you are going through,” and then, once they have your confidence, they begin to talk more than listen. In the second, a practitioner, often a physician or nurse, hurriedly sees you. Perhaps they are busy. Maybe they have their own agenda. Perhaps, at some point in your story, they make up their mind about what's going on and are now simply seeking to confirm it. In any case, you get a distinct feeling that you're not being seen or heard. Listen to this feeling. Recommending prescriptions or therapies without knowing your values or hearing your entire story can lead to dangerous situations and regrets.

#8 - The expert discourages you from getting a second opinion.

Getting a second opinion is never a bad thing. If patients ask me about getting a second opinion, I encourage it. Maybe I'll be proven correct, perhaps I'll have the opportunity to learn something, but most importantly, the patient can move forward knowing they have the proper diagnosis and treatment. When someone warns you against getting a second opinion or dismisses second opinions without really listening, they do you and themselves a disservice. They are also providing a clue that what they are selling may be more about them than you. No matter how confident or influential the physician, treating their ego should never take precedence over your health.

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#9 - The expert asks you to stop conventional treatments.

People who don't know you or your medical situation should not make recommendations about how you take care of yourself. They certainly should not ask you to stop medications other physicians have prescribed. I am not talking about situations where a medication may be causing side effects or contributing to symptoms where stopping it may be perfectly reasonable. Instead, I am referring to cases where treatments that are working are stopped. For example, I've known patients with Parkinson's who were told to stop taking carbidopa/levodopa, the single most effective medication for this condition, in favor of acupuncture, herbal treatments, dietary changes, or cannabis. Abruptly stopping this medication will not only worsen the symptoms of stiffness and tremor it was treating, but it could have disastrous consequences ranging from falls to a life-threatening condition called parkinsonism hyperpyrexia characterized by intense muscle spasms, fever, unstable blood pressure, and sometimes death. People who don't know what they don't know and who believe they know what they don't know are dangerous when they start making recommendations about your health.

Medical bullshit is everyone's problem. Please be responsible for what information you share with your friends and family. If you see something, say something—you don't have to call someone a liar, but you can question their facts and information.