

10 epic medical fails: Bet most of you have fallen for at least one! (Part one)

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The annals of medical history are littered with examples of serious medical blunders: Leeches, blood-letting, mercury for syphilis, X-rays for acne, radical mastectomies, thalidomide . . . I could go on and on. Medicine is changing so rapidly that it's now said that within 10 years of graduating medical school, half of what a young doctor learns will be proven obsolete.

So we need to maintain a spirit of humility when considering some of the medical verities which seem to go unchallenged today. Accordingly, here are a few of my submissions for contemporary medical “epic fails” which are likely to have impacted you or a loved one.

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1) Leg braces for pigeon-toed children. A great example of medical overkill, these cumbersome leg braces were popular when I was a kid, and I was fitted with them because an overzealous pediatrician thought I walked funny. They were featured in the movie “Forrest Gump”—when I saw poor Forrest getting them strapped on in the movie, tears literally welled up in my eyes. Like Forrest, I triumphantly shed mine and went on to be a long distance runner. In fact, pediatricians now

agree this was a completely unsupported medical fad, and most kids naturally outgrow their early gait problems, even becoming outstanding athletes, without harsh intervention.

2) Steroid injections for spinal stenosis. A bony impingement of the nerves, spinal stenosis is a condition that affects millions of primarily older Americans who suffer from back pain and impaired walking. Traditionally, steroid injections (epidurals) have been used to relieve pressure on the spinal cord. But a recent study showed that steroid epidurals were no more effective than a shot of short-acting local anesthetic at relieving symptoms. This is ironic because steroids have so many side effects, and contaminated shots were recently implicated in a tragic outbreak of devastating, sometimes fatal, fungal infections.

3) Arthroscopic surgery for knee osteoarthritis. Pioneered in highly-paid athletes with sore knees, arthroscopic surgery soon became routine treatment for knee osteoarthritis, a degenerative condition associated with aging. It seemed to make sense, and some patients appeared to get relief. But any kind of surgical “fix” for pain evokes a big placebo response. A recent study confirmed this, showing that “sham” surgery was as effective as real surgery for patients with osteoarthritis. The hypocrisy is that many orthopedists who were willing to perform scientifically unsubstantiated procedures on patients usually played down the documented benefits of curcumin, glucosamine/chondroitin, and fish oil.

4) Aspirin for heart disease prevention. Here’s a dilemma for the pharmaceutical industry: “baby aspirin” became a cruel oxymoron when it was shown that giving aspirin to kids with fevers could result in a devastating condition, Reyes’ Syndrome. What to do with all that low-dose aspirin? Repackage it as a preventive for heart disease in everyone over 60, 50, even 40! Turns out that, while aspirin is an appropriate blood-thinner for people who have had a heart attack, stroke, or specific heart condition, it’s not worth taking it if

you're otherwise healthy. The (albeit small) chance you'll develop a bleeding ulcer or a hemorrhagic stroke from even low-dose, enteric-coated aspirin turns out to be far greater than its (almost-negligible) preventive benefits. The results of a recent study convinced the FDA to issue this warning: ". . . scientific data do not support the use of aspirin as a preventive medication by people who have not had a heart attack, stroke or cardiovascular problems." If in doubt, check with your doctor to see if you can ditch your aspirin, and rely instead on natural blood thinners like Omega 3 fish oil, vitamin E, or Kyolic aged garlic extract.

5) "Just eat a healthy diet and skip your supplements." This old saw still gets a lot of play in doctors' offices and in the mainstream media. I just saw a new patient who recently underwent a myriad of expensive, mostly unnecessary tests as part of an "Executive Check-Up" at a prestigious New York medical center. The bottom line: "You're fine, don't bother taking vitamins." This despite a plethora of studies that show that a high percentage of Americans have suboptimal levels of key B vitamins, magnesium, vitamin D, and omega 3 fatty acids to name but a few of the micronutrients many of us lack. Not to mention the documented benefits of supplements and nutraceuticals for preventing and reversing many health problems. Explore why I think the supplement naysayers are dead-wrong in my recent podcast and in this blog.

This is only the first half of our look into modern medical fails. Keep an eye out for next week's newsletter, where I'll show you five more ways we've missed the mark in medicine. As always, I encourage you to share these newsletters with your friends and loved ones. You never know – one simple forward could save a friend from a now-outmoded treatment.

Continue to Part Two...