

## AMA Journal of Ethics®

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### HISTORY OF MEDICINE

#### How Long Have Supplements Promised to Make Us Slim, Sexy, and Virile?

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##### Abstract

The American Medical Association's Historic Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection provides a glimpse into the origins of America's cosmetic and supplement industry and the advertising practices that sustain it.

##### Supplements in the Industrial Age

Turn on the television, open Instagram, sit at a bus stop, and you will be bombarded with messages that your looks could and should be improved upon—if you just buy stuff. Individuals' and companies' claims to secrets of success in weight loss, flawless skin, or lifelong virility are not new. Ancient Egyptians used makeup as we know it,<sup>1</sup> and scientists have documented face and body paint use during the middle Pleistocene, about 130 000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> Since the Industrial Age, consumers have created a market for enhancement products. Increased rates of literacy and technology advances<sup>3</sup> led to a boom in newspaper and magazine sales, and both media were filled with advertisements for patent medicines, including supplements.<sup>4</sup>

From 1906 to 1975, the best resource the public had for evaluating claims about supplements was the Bureau of Investigation of the American Medical Association (AMA).<sup>5</sup> Individuals curious about weight loss pills or beauty creams could write to the AMA's chemical laboratory to request information or relay horror stories about the ill effects of their use of such products. When the AMA investigated, it reported fraudsters to the Better Business Bureau or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Due to high demand for its services, however the AMA's lab was pressed to prioritize investigation of supposed cures for cancer and diphtheria. Some beauty, diet, and virility products' effectiveness claims were so outrageous that the lab often responded to inquiries about them by stating that any company or physician making such clearly false promises should be reported to state authorities. But state medical licensure as we know it today didn't exist until the late 19th century.<sup>6</sup>

Advertisements for supplements were directed to consumers in newspapers, letters, pamphlets, celebrity endorsements, and on billboards. For 69 years, the AMA's Bureau of Investigation collected these products' packaging and advertisements, establishing what is known today as the Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection

of the AMA Archives. Some of its most interesting items are categorized by “ailment” and are described herein.

### Before and After Fat Foe

In the late 19th and early 20th century, America underwent a cultural shift in body image. Between Hollywood and the advertising industry, a desire to have a lean physique became *de rigueur*.<sup>7</sup> While obesity and “overindulgence” were problems for both men and women,<sup>8</sup> advertisements for **weight loss supplements** in the early to mid-20th century tended to feature images of women’s bodies, in particular.

This early example of “anti-obesity” advertising represents women’s bodies, despite use of the gender-neutral term *fat folks*.

Figure 1. Fat-Foe Obesity Herb Tea Ad, 1912

**SIP YOUR  
FAT AWAY**

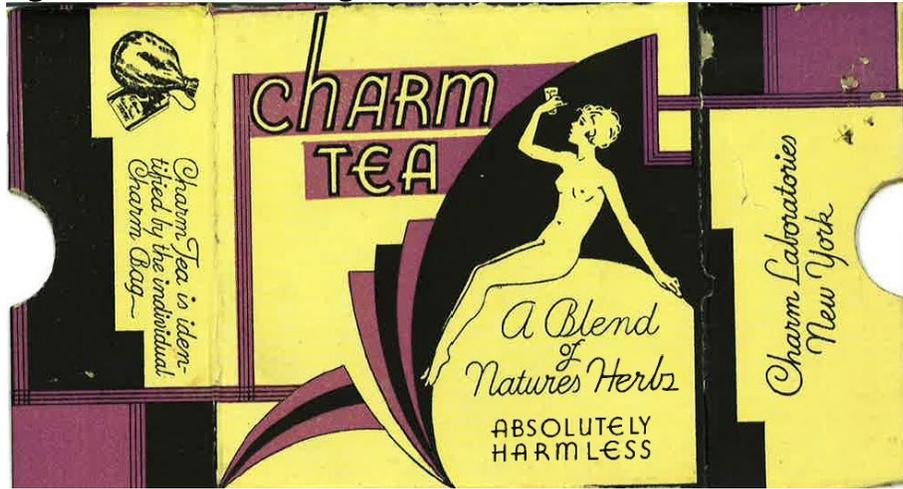
**START  
REDUCING TODAY**  
*with*

**FAT FOE**  
**INCLUDING**  
**OBESIT  
HERB TEA**  
*which brings  
JOY TO  
FAT FOLKS*

**Price \$1.00**

Weight loss tea is still commonly available today, although we have known for at least 100 years that weight loss attributed to tea is minimal.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 2. Charm Tea Package, 1933



Re-duce-oids were more harmful than teas, with side effects ranging from serious to fatal.

Figure 3. Re-duce-oids Ad, 1929



Although Re-duce-oids were for both men and women, the packaging represents 2 lean women's bodies' silhouettes.

Figure 4. Re-duce-oids Package, 1936



Re-duce-oid pills included a thyroid extract and potassium iodide, a commonly used medication for hyperthyroidism, and were especially dangerous for persons with diabetes, goiter, or coronary diseases, each of which is commonly comorbid with obesity.<sup>10</sup>

The ingredients used in Re-duce-oids were atypical for the time, since most reducing tonics were simply laxatives, suggesting why the 1920s and 1930s were known as the “golden age of purgation.”<sup>11</sup>

Figure 5. Bonkora Ad, 1933

### Appearance Benefited by Normal Weight

Most stout people reduce for the sake of appearance.

Certainly a trim, daintily covered figure, is far more attractive than heavy neck and shoulders, large hips and thighs, and thick ankles.

But you should consider your health, too. Excessively stout people are prone to more diseases than those not burdened with excessive fat.

Excess fat crowds the great vital organs, particularly the heart.

Insurance companies, which have the best possible doctors to advise them, are constantly warning their policy-holders against overweight.

Don't take chances with excess fat. For appearance sake—for increased popularity and for your health's sake, take steps to get rid of this fat at once.

### No Fatiguing Exercises

We don't advocate strenuous exercise for stout persons.

Mild exercise is desirable, if it is not carried to the point of excess.

Walking is an excellent form of exercise. Swimming is good exercise, also good for general health. Tennis is good exercise if you do not carry it to excess. Golf is healthful. If the weather and other conditions are favorable take exercise in the open air.

But do these things for enjoyment—don't overdo them as a duty.

### Has Your Fat Made You Look Older Than Your Age?

Fat is associated in people's minds with age. If two women are about the same age and about the same appearance as regards facial lines and complexion, the stouter one will often be judged to be older than the thinner one.

We all like the figure that makes us look as young as our age.

This is possible by following the treatment if excess weight is due to indiscretion in diet or lack of exercise. When strenuous, overdone, health-breaking exercises are avoided. When, instead of weakening yourself by insufficient diets, you eat plenty of the kind of energy-producing vegetables we have suggested. When you keep the system free from wastes by proper elimination, for which Bonkora is designed.

Eat—don't be hungry. Exercise in moderation. Follow the Bonkora Treatment faithfully. And keep it up!

### Start Today. The Sooner You Begin, the Sooner You May Have the Beneficial Effects

Start the Bonkora Treatment Today. Keep it up faithfully. Don't be discouraged if you don't see results the first week.

Some people respond more quickly than others. In some cases beneficial results may be noticed in a day or two. In others, it may take several days before results are really noticeable, but when once they start, the reduction should be steady.

Bonkora contains no drugs which speed up the heart action or accelerate the vital organs unduly.

But, in spite of that, don't try to rush the treatment too rapidly, by overdosing or overdoing. Follow the directions.

If you lose a couple of pounds a week it is healthier than losing a pound a day. Moderate reduction allows the body and skin to adjust themselves to the new condition, and tends to prevent the weakness that may result from drastic change in diet or starvation diet and heavy dosing.

**If You Wish Further Information or Advice Write Us**

We have tried to make this circular as clear as possible. However, if there is any further information you desire, please don't hesitate to write us. We will be glad to answer. But be sure to address your letter to the proper department.

Address:

### FREE—A Jar of New Beauty Cream

Read about Bon Sontay, the new kind of beauty cream in enclosed circular. One of these circulars is enclosed with every box of Bonkora, with coupon attached. After you have taken six bottles of Bonkora, send us the 6 coupons. Write us a letter telling your experience with Bonkora.

Tell us how much you weigh at that time and how much you weighed before starting the treatment.

In return for your kindness, we will send you FREE a FULL SIZE Jar of Bon Sontay Cream.

Bonkora usually sells at \$1.00 a bottle. 3 bottles for \$2.75. 6 bottles for \$5.00.

# Bon Kora

TRADE MARK REG.

TREATMENT

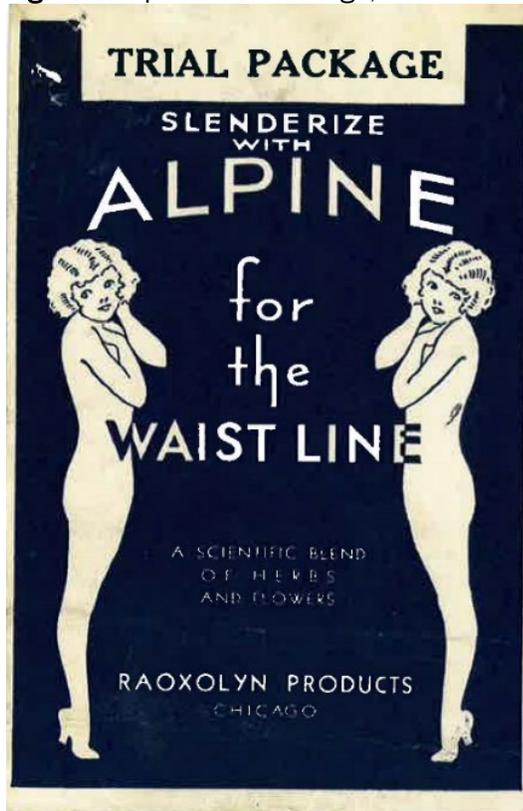


6% ALCOHOL

The Complete BonKora Treatment Consists of an Eliminant with Rational Method for Correcting Causes of Excess Weight Due to Indiscretion of Diet and Lack of Exercise

FULL DIRECTIONS INSIDE

Figure 6. Alpine Trial Package, 1934



In 1941, the Federal Trade Commission successfully issued a cease-and-desist order to stop Re-duce-oids manufacturers from disseminating misinformation.<sup>12</sup> Three years earlier in 1938, passage of the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act enabled the US government oversight of some supplements,<sup>7</sup> forcing many companies out of business. Demand continued apace, however, and new products entered the market.

In the 1950s, a variety of new supplements entered the market, including phenylpropanolamine, which was the primary ingredient in both Du-Dol and RX-120.

Figure 7. Du-Dol Ad, 1957

A 1957 advertisement for Du-Dol. The left side features a woman's profile holding a martini glass, with the text 'du·dol NEW "REDUCING COCKTAIL"'. Below this is a 'MONEY BACK GUARANTEE' banner. The right side is a yellow background with a red border, containing a 'DON'T DELAY! SUPPLIES LIMITED! SEND NOW!' headline, the address for Anderson Pharmacal Corp., a return policy, and a coupon with checkboxes for 'Rush regular size supply at once' and 'Rush big double supply at once'. It also includes fields for name, address, city, zone, and state, and a 'P.S. SAVE MORE!' note about postage.

Figure 8. RX-120 Ad, 1958

**NOW...YOU CAN WEAR**  
**REVEALING BATHING SUITS,**  
**SHORTS, EVENING GOWNS!**



**BEFORE**

←

Case #3478. Ann Cusmano, only 21 but she looks 20 years older! Here she weighs 225 pounds! A wallflower because of this ugly fat! What a tragedy!



**HAVE A SLENDER, GLAMOROUS FIGURE IN TIME FOR YOUR SUMMER WARDROBE!**

Yes, now you can trim down those unattractive pounds and inches all over your body just in time for the summer months ahead! You can take off 9 pounds in 10 days, 18 pounds in 20 days, 27 pounds in 30 days... lose up to 49 pounds in 8 weeks or we'll pay you \$14.00. You'll be able to wear revealing bathing suits, slacks, shorts, evening gowns in time for the glorious fun-filled days ahead... even before the Summer months start! All without special diets, regimens, dietary supplements, habit-forming drugs, exercise, calorie counting, massage, hungry moments... with new amazingly safe RX-120.



**AFTER**

←

It's the same girl! She took off 90 pounds with RX-120. Now she wears a size 11... instead of 22½. She's lovely... she has a young, glamorous figure! The whole world looks different!

SEP 17 1958  
30 8444

WILSON-WILLIAMS, Inc., 114 East 32 Street, New York 16, N. Y.

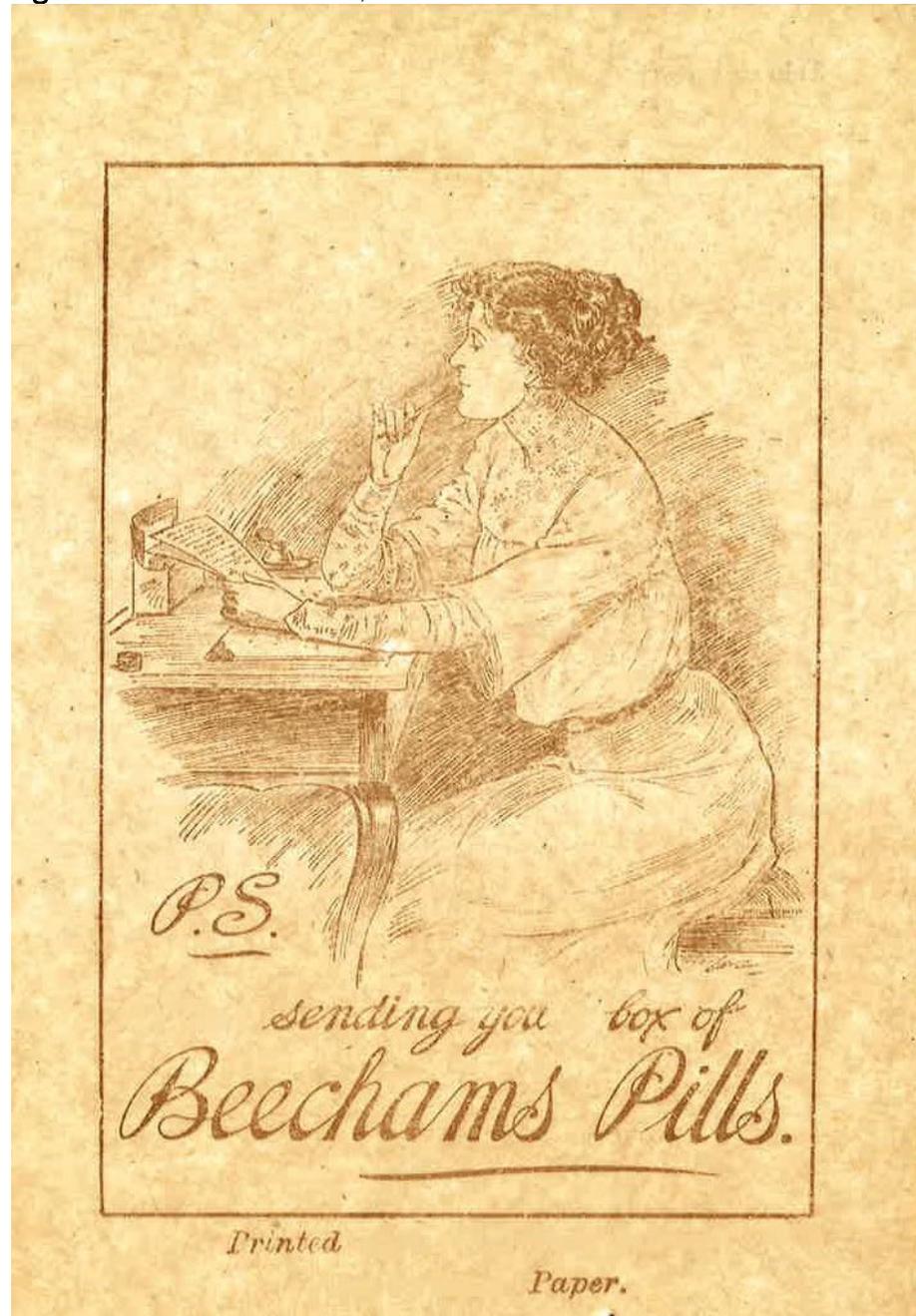
Laboratory reports confirmed by 1958 that, taken in amounts allowed over the counter, phenylpropanolamine did not promote weight loss.<sup>13</sup> By 1962, 20 court actions had been filed alleging false advertising for products containing phenylpropanolamine.<sup>14</sup> This nasal decongestant and appetite suppressant was removed from over-the-counter sales in 2005.

### Beauty Products and Cosmetics

Most beauty products and cosmetics were, and still are, applied topically. But demand for products promising clear, unblemished skin led some manufacturers to **promote dietary supplements** for this purpose, too, regardless of whether they worked.

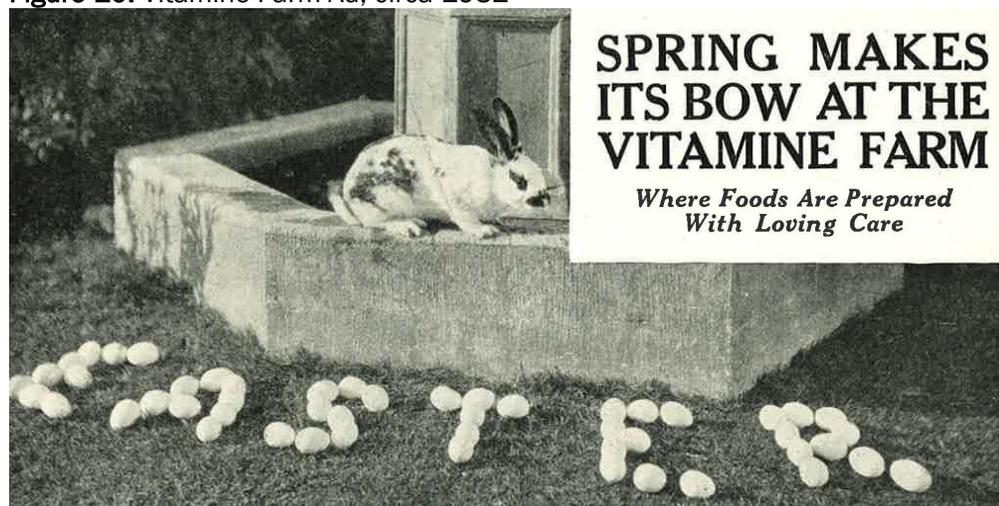
Beecham's pills claimed to cure acne. In addition to claiming to cure acne, Beecham's pills also claimed to cure cold chills, "lowness of spirits," stomach pain, wounds, and headaches. Scientists in England found that the pills contained aloe, ginger, and powdered soap.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 9.** Beecham's Pills Ad, circa 1909



The Vitamine Farm, based in Geneva, Illinois, also promised a cure for a variety of ills with mineral salts and other ingredients printed in advertisements.

Figure 10. Vitamine Farm Ad, circa 1932



## SPRING MAKES ITS BOW AT THE VITAMINE FARM

*Where Foods Are Prepared  
With Loving Care*

# We Raise In Our Gardens Twelve Parts Of Your Body Chemistry

### THOSE TWELVE MINERAL SALTS WHICH KEEP YOU ALIVE WHEN YOU LIVE

**CALCIUM**—The executive, strong, enduring chemical, which gives us will, long life and red blood.

**SILICON**—The joy maker, the optimist, speed artist, hair growing chemical which brightens eyesight and complexion, and immunizes against tuberculosis.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**FLUORIN**—The youth preserver, the protector against infections, bone disease, and fear.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**POTASSIUM**—The healer, pain reliever, enthusiast, athlete, and the preventive of constipation and growths.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**SODIUM**—The alkalinizer, the digestive chemical, the good nature and clear brain chemical which prevents catarrh, deafness, hardening processes, moodiness, and enables the body to take up iron.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**CHLORIN**—The laundryman of the body which expels waste matter, and keeps joints and tendons supple. Prevents pyorrhoea, excessive fat, and auto intoxication.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**IODINE**—The great gland regulator, which gives mental energy, originality, pep and confidence, and which prevents goitre, insanity through auto intoxication, and nervous breakdowns. Prevents baldness.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**MANGANESE**—The chemical of poise, strong nerves and good judgment, which coordinates thoughts, gives elasticity, and quick recuperative ability.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**MAGNESIUM**—The cool, alkaline, refreshing, and sleep promoting chemical, which is a laxative, complexion aid, and preventive of wrinkles from restlessness and anxiety.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**IRON**—The master chemical which keeps the life force in harmony in the body, gives warmth, magnetism, mental endurance, and creative ability, success, ambition, and vitality.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**SULPHUR**—The beautifier, the inspirer, the maker of glossy hair, which makes it difficult for disease to enter the body, which promotes bile secretions, throwing out bodily impurities, and which enables the liver to take up the 16 chemical elements.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

**PHOSPHORUS**—The life chemical which is consumed with every thought. Prevents neurasthenia, and enables other elements to create bone, brain and red blood cells. Prevents fatigue. Needed badly by all types who do any kind of mental or indoor work.

30 Capsules .....\$1.00

Every one of these chemicals is derived from foods, and foods alone. Drugless medicines of great power are they. They are absolutely pure, absolutely clean, and everyone is grown under our own supervision. No preservatives or adulterants of any kind are added. The foods are dehydrated, powdered and put into dainty capsules so that no matter where you are you may have your twelve life-giving chemicals.

Each order is prepared individually, and fresh, at the time of the order. No wholesale stocks to deteriorate. Order your foods five days in advance of your needs, allowing us time to prepare your individual order. Our foods are prepared with loving care. The vibration of 100% wishes for your health is put into every little capsule.

"You love every one of these capsules, don't you," said a visitor to the Vitamine Farm. "The whole place reflects it."

## THE VITAMINE FARM, GENEVA, ILLINOIS

### “Diseases of Men”

While weight loss and beauty products were aimed more at women than men, anything related to sex was nearly always geared to men. Impotence, virility, and venereal diseases were regarded as “diseases of men” that were “more sensitive” issues, requiring discretion. Physicians’ and manufacturers’ products targeting men were advertised in what were called *street guides*.

In the late 19th to mid-20th century, men could expect to come upon pocket-sized street guides, containing information about local baseball games, bus routes, health advice, a directory of men’s health specialists, and advertisements for tonics, creams, and capsules.<sup>16</sup> Impotence or lack of sex drive were described euphemistically and as “abnormal conditions.”

Figure 11. Set of 3 Street Guides for Men, 1922 to 1937

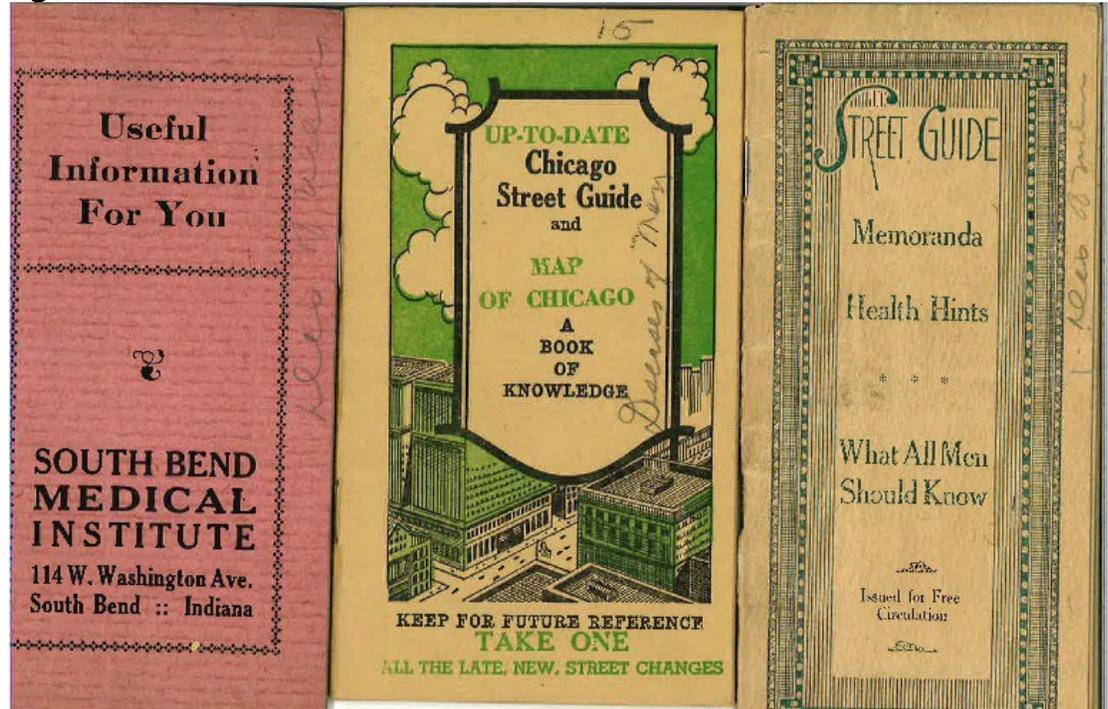
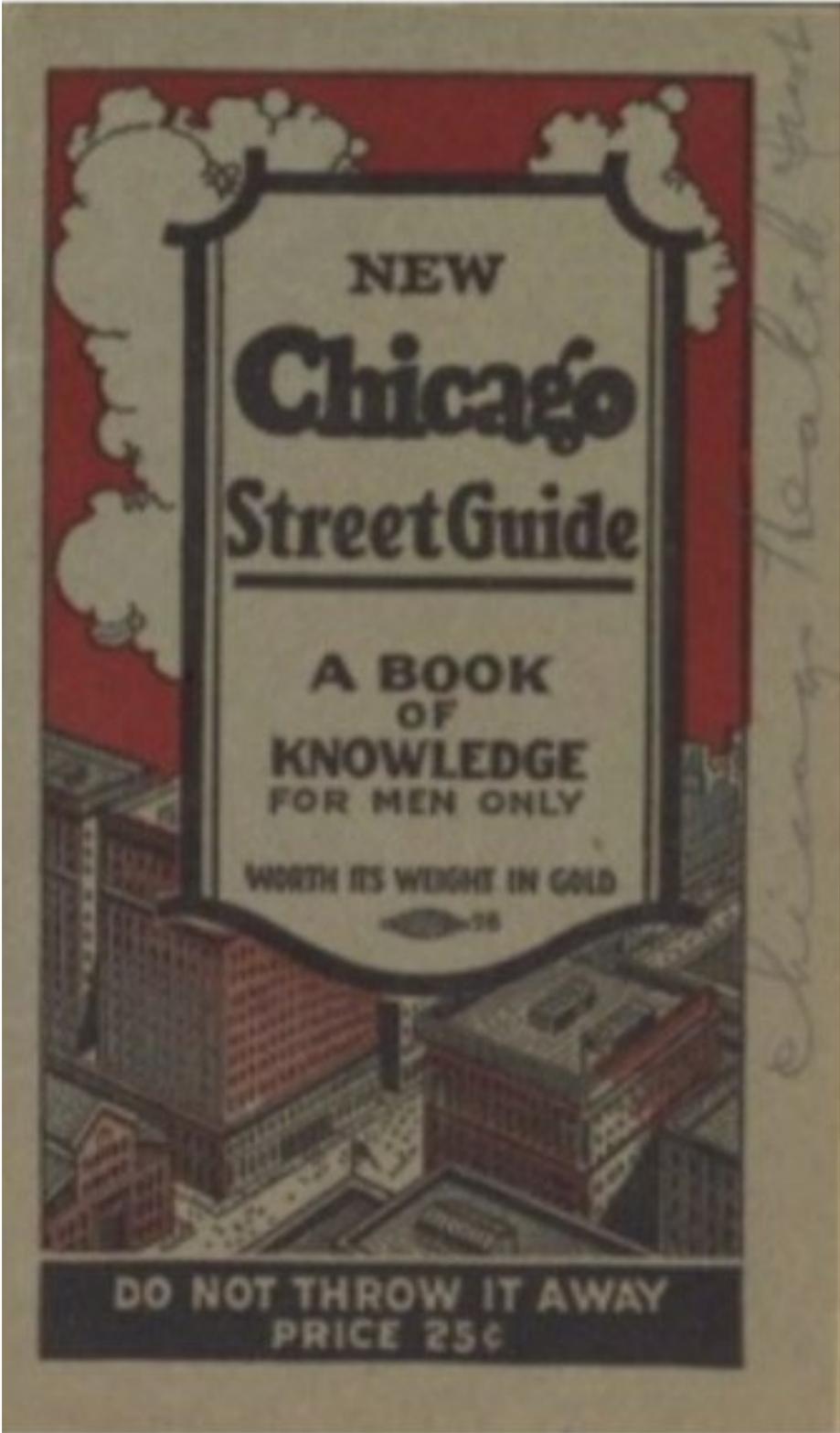


Figure 12: New Chicago Street Guide, 1928



The Erie Medical Company advertised that its product, in which the main ingredient was hemoglobin of bullock's blood, would transform men suffering "sexual weakness" into men as "strong as an ox."<sup>17</sup>

Figure 13: Erie Medical Company Ad, 1911

**Haemoglobin of Bullock's Blood**

Now available to all who seek, in renewal of perfect health and normal vigor, to regain the lost zest of life, and the glow of enthusiasm which should last longer than mere youthfulness.

**How Haemoglobin Tinges Life Anew with "The Gold of Vigor."**

This Haemoglobin compound restores to the blood the red life-giving elements of organic phosphorus, iron, etc., which the generative glands, lymphatic glands, nerves and brain tissues require. By increasing or rejuvenating the activity of these glands, making them secrete normally, and the nerve and brain tissues act with healthy vigor, a great change is worked in the general physical and mental condition.

The haemoglobin of bullock's blood is now being treated by a process which obtains the full value of its remarkable building and sustaining forces.

This powerful extract has a decided effect upon the glandular system, due to the ready absorption of the iron, organic phosphorus, etc.

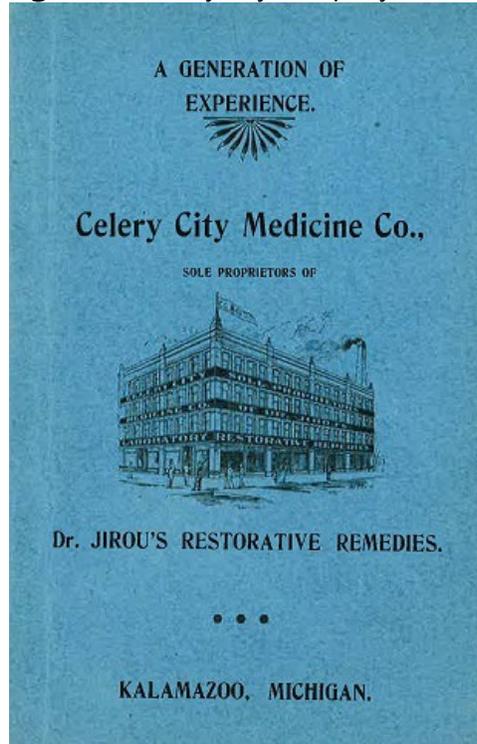
In sexual weakness it has been tested in many cases without the patient's knowledge, he being told that it was administered for his general broken health. These patients have reported to the doctor the happiest effects upon the debilitated sexual condition, which came as a surprise to them.

It has been found that frequently the wasted exterior genital glands of the male begin to fill out and become firm and healthful after a few days.

Women showing all the evidences of the "change of life"—cessation of the menses, shrinkage of the bust, hot flashes and

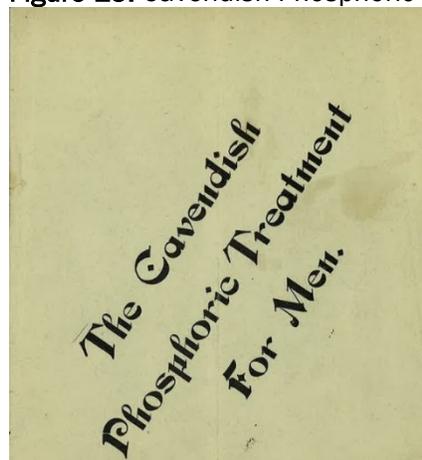
Celery City Company's Dr Jirou marketed its "Famous French Prescriptions for sexual weakness, impotency, and small, shrunken organs,"<sup>18</sup> as tablets containing leaves of coca (primary ingredient in cocaine), nux vomica (with strychnine and brucine, both poisonous), aphrodisiacal herbs and chemical compounds, and phosphorous (more common than bullock's blood, but less common than glandular therapy, which is discussed below).

**Figure 14.** Celery City Company Famous French Prescriptions, 1915



The Cavendish Phosphoric Treatment offered another phosphorous-based product. Ironically, high serum phosphorous levels are now known to cause erectile dysfunction in some cases.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 15.** Cavendish Phosphoric Treatment, 1886



The Cumberland Chemical Company created a nostrum it called Sextonique, which promised to “rectify vital weakness” and Tonique Tablets to supplement the tonic 3 times per day.

Figure 16. Cumberland Chemical Company Pamphlet, 1926

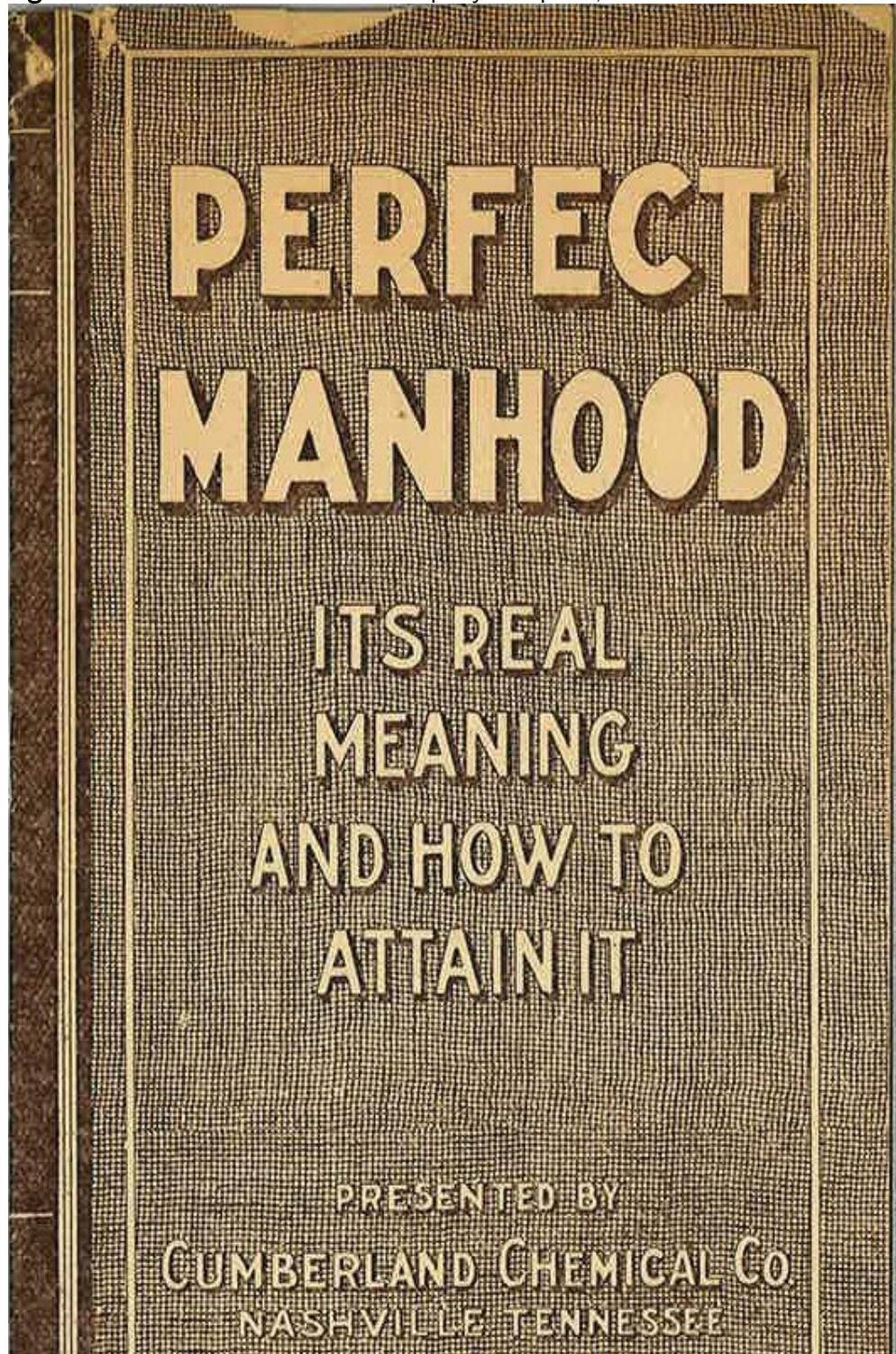


Figure 17. Cumberland Chemical Company Ad, 1925

**A DIRECT  
CHALLENGE  
TO IMITATORS**

**A FEW STATEMENTS OF FACTS TO PROVE THAT "SEXTONIQUE"  
IS THE ORIGINAL AND GENUINE  
"SEX-TONIC"**

*The wonderful results reported by users of the genuine C. C. C. SEXTONIQUE treatment in thousands of cases is so well known that many persons and firms have attempted to make money out of our reputation of years standing, by offering various imitations and substitutes to the public, claiming that their preparations "are the original and genuine Sex-Tonic for vital weakness."*

*Several such imitators have sprung up over the country; many of them have deliberately copied our booklets, circulars, etc. Six or eight such firms have started in business right here in Nashville—now only one or two remain, as their existence is generally short-lived. In order to warn the public against such imitators, we wish to state the actual facts clearly, which are*

**MATTERS OF RECORD**

- 1st. The Cumberland Chemical Company is the exclusive owner of the trademarks "SEXTONIQUE" and "Sex-Tonic". "Sex-Tonic" is a registered trade-mark, granted by the U. S. Government under registration No. 39,249. Any person or firm using the names "Sex-Tonic" or "Sextonique" is guilty of an infringement, and liable to prosecution.*
- 2nd. Any person or firm claiming that their preparation is the original and genuine "Sex-Tonic" is guilty of a deliberate falsehood. The GENUINE "SEXTONIQUE" or "SEXTONIQUE" can be obtained only from the Cumberland Chemical Co., and the name SEXTONIQUE has been in constant use by this company for over ten years. (Most of these imitators have been in business only a short time.)*
- 3rd. Any person or firm using or copying our copyrighted literature is guilty of an infringement upon our rights, granted under the copyright laws by the Government, and is liable to prosecution.*
- 4th. Every testimonial published by us is a genuine, signed letter, written by actual users of SEXTONIQUE and C. C. C. treatments; any person or firm using these testimonials to advertise other preparations, is guilty of wilful misrepresentation.*

*We publish the above clear statements, in order that we may protect our patrons and the general public, as well as ourselves, against the claims of imitators who are infringing upon our trade-marks and copyrights.*

*The Cumberland Chemical Company is a reliable, financially sound business institution, having been in business for many years, and backs up each treatment sold with a Positive Agreement to Refund every cent paid, in the event any treatment sold does not give complete satisfaction to the purchaser.*

**Cumberland Chemical Company**  
**NASHVILLE, TENN., U. S. A.**

**THERE IS ONLY ONE ORIGINAL AND GENUINE "SEXTONIQUE"**

**DO NOT ORDER A SUBSTITUTE OR IMITATION IF YOU WANT TO BE ASSURED OF SATISFACTION AND FAIR TREATMENT.**

COPYRIGHT 1925

According to the AMA's own Morris Fishbein, no method of treating illness in the 1920s was more popular than glandular therapy.<sup>20</sup> Used for weight loss, impotence, and treating other ills, Goldglan glandular tonic was "recommended for the man who doesn't realize that he is not paying his wife the attention he formerly did" and was said to contain thyroid, anterior pituitary, and orchitic substances.<sup>21</sup> Similar products are still sold today for erectile dysfunction, although as early as 1924, the AMA reported that there was not sufficient evidence to make these claims for glandular therapy.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 18. Goldglan Packaging, 1928



### Conclusion

Despite some public backlash against the diet and beauty culture of the 21st century,<sup>23</sup> weight loss and other products tempt many of us to attend our deepest insecurities. And despite FDA authority, unregulated supplements remain widely available and advertised. Items gathered in the AMA's [collection of quack](#) beauty, weight loss, and virility products suggest the persistent appeal of enhancement and a century-old (at least) history of profiteering on insecurity.

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#### Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The author(s) had no conflicts of interest to disclose.

*The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.*