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, and scientists have documented face and body paint use during the middle Pleistocene, about 130,000 years ago. Since the Industrial Age, consumers have created a market for enhancement products. Increased rates of literacy and technology advances led to a boom in newspaper and magazine sales, and both media were filled with advertisements for patent medicines, including supplements.

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). 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.

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.* While obesity and “overindulgence” were problems for both men and women, 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
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.⁹

**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.¹⁰
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.”

Figure 5. Bonkora Ad, 1933
In 1941, the Federal Trade Commission successfully issued a cease-and-desist order to stop Re-duce-oids manufacturers from disseminating misinformation. Three years earlier in 1938, passage of the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act enabled the US government oversight of some supplements, 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.
Laboratory reports confirmed by 1958 that, taken in amounts allowed over the counter, phenylpropanolamine did not promote weight loss.\textsuperscript{13} By 1962, 20 court actions had been filed alleging false advertising for products containing phenylpropanolamine.\textsuperscript{14} 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.15

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
“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. 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.”

Figure 13: Erie Medical Company Ad, 1911
Celery City Company’s Dr Jirou marketed its “Famous French Prescriptions for sexual weakness, impotency, and small, shrunken organs,” 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.

**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 by years standing, by offering various imitations and substitutes to the public, claiming that these preparations "are the original and genuine Sex-Tonic for vital treatment."

Several such imitators have sprung up over the country, many of them have deliberately copied our booklets, circulars, etc. Not a single such firm has started in business right here in Nashville—nor only one or two remain, as their existence is generally short-lived. In order to warn the public against such imitations, 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. 302,410.

2nd. Any person or firm using the names "Sex-Tonic" or "Sextonique" is guilty of an infringement, and liable to prosecution.

3rd. Any person or firm claiming that their preparation is the original and genuine "Sex-Tonic" is guilty of a deliberate falsehood. The GENUINE "SEX-TONIC" 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.)

4th. 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 liable to prosecution.

5th. 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 willful misrepresentation.

We publish the above 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.
According to the AMA’s own Morris Fishbein, no method of treating illness in the 1920s was more popular than glandular therapy.\textsuperscript{20} 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”\textsuperscript{’} and was said to contain thyroid, anterior pituitary, and orchitic substances.\textsuperscript{21} 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.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Figure 18.} Goldglan Packaging, 1928

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\textbf{Conclusion}

Despite some public backlash against the diet and beauty culture of the 21st century,\textsuperscript{23} 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.
References


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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.*