

Episode: Author Interview: "How Long Have Supplements Promised to Make Us Slim, Sexy, and Virile?"

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is my colleague Jorie Braunold, the archivist for the American Medical Association in Chicago, Illinois. She's here to discuss her article, *How Long Have Supplements Promised To Make Us Slim, Sexy, and Virile?*, in the May 2022 issue of the Journal, [Underregulated Supplements](#). Jorie, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me today. [music fades out]

JORIE BRAUNOLD: Thank you for having me.

HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point that your article is making?

BRAUNOLD: So, I would say the main ethics point is a simple one, which is that humans have insecurities about certain things, which are typically related to sexual attractiveness. Those insecurities have been exploited by the advertising industry since the advertising industry has been a thing.

HOFF: [chuckles]

BRAUNOLD: And because the actual treatments for these quote-unquote "health issues," if you can call them that, which are more related to vanity than health, they take time and effort and may produce unsatisfactory results if you go through a doctor, a legitimate medical pathway.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

BRAUNOLD: There will always be a market for quacks to take advantage and offer unsafe, or at best, useless products.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

BRAUNOLD: So, in the early days when patent medicines were all the rage, there was no FDA or any sort of restrictions. And so, the AMA had a department that was set up to advise the public on these issues, but they were pretty overwhelmed because medical licenses were easy to come by, and in many cases, weren't even needed to sell and promote tonics and remedies and whatever else was brewed in somebody's basement. And so, when the AMA was able to address a specific supplement, even when it was proven beyond a reasonable doubt to be dangerous, let alone useless, which most of them were, people continued to use these products. So, a great example that I found out after writing this article is the story of Radithor.

HOFF: Hmm.

BRAUNOLD: So, Radithor was basically uranium in a bottle.

HOFF: [laughs]

BRAUNOLD: And there was one socialite in particular who swore by it. He sent it to all his friends, he talked it up in the press, all of that. And he used it mostly for virility, which in the article is one of the few supplement categories that is targeted towards men.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

BRAUNOLD: After his jaw literally fell off and he died, his friend, who was the mayor of New York at the time—his name is Jimmy Walker—told journalists that he would keep using it because it made him feel good, and it gave him a pep in his step.

HOFF: Wow. [laughs]

BRAUNOLD: So, at the end of the day—yeah, it's wild—as long as there are loud people with easy answers, there will be tough ethical questions for the medical and pharmaceutical industry to address.

We've seen how in the past, the medical industry has been perhaps overzealous in finding the proper Western scientific method, and it's led us to ignore useful forms of therapy like Chinese acupuncture and other homeopathic cures. So, it's tough, and it's also hard for doctors to tell people that feel that their tea remedies have changed their lives that their experience is not based on science.

HOFF: So, what do you see as the most important thing specifically for health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

BRAUNOLD: I think the key for doctors and medical students and trainees is that when you're discussing homeopathic and other unregulated treatments with patients, an appeal to reason might not be sufficient to dissuade someone who has been brought up on the idea that they and their weight or skin or sexual activity levels are not enough.

HOFF: Mm.

BRAUNOLD: Even as someone who studies this and knows intimately all the ways I'm being manipulated and how ineffective these products are, I constantly have to remind myself, whether I'm in Walgreens or on Instagram or passing by Fox News, that if something like this really worked, it would be heralded as a medical breakthrough around the world. And even then, sometimes I think like, well, maybe it'll have a placebo effect. Maybe they don't know. The point is that these insecurities we've been building up since birth have essentially overwhelmed our rational brains. We see celebrities who are praised and worshipped for their beauty. And they tell us that all it takes is drinking this tea or taking a pill, and it's hard not to be seduced.

HOFF: Mm.

BRAUNOLD: So, the role of the doctor is to remind patients of the simple truth, which is that miracle weight loss or anti-aging cures don't exist, and anything that sounds too good to be true probably is. If there was some pill that could be taken to prevent obesity, for instance, all doctors would be prescribing it. And pharmaceuticals have gotten a bad rap for some pretty good reasons. But patients should be reminded that they do go through many rounds of testing before approval, which is more than can be said for many natural supplements.

HOFF: Mm. And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

BRAUNOLD: So, something that I've actually noticed since writing the article is there's been a huge uptick in products marketed towards mood and energy improvement.

HOFF: Hmm.

BRAUNOLD: If you go to the grocery store, there's so many drinks that promise so many different outcomes. And they're a little different than the typical supplements because they're not really preying on our insecurities. They're oftentimes being touted as a safer alternative to alcohol and drugs, which they certainly do seem to be and likely are.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

BRAUNOLD: But it looks like we're headed towards a second golden age of patent medicines and remedies based on sort of iffy science with these mood-boosting tonics and rest-inducing soaps and all of that kind of stuff. So, it's definitely something to be on the lookout for. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Interesting. Jorie, thank you so much for being on the podcast. It's been as enlightening as always.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks so much.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of the May 2022 issue for free, visit our site, JournalofEthics.org. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.