

# QUACKERY

*Michael Bono*

In my reading of *The Golden Age of Quackery*, by Stewart H. Holbrook, I found parallels between the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Electrology Association (AEA). Since its very beginning in the early 1800s, the AMA worked as a “patient advocate,” vigilantly protecting the patient from medical quackery. The AMA worked tirelessly, and succeeded in establishing national standards for medical schools. This organization was also fearless in taking on the rich and powerful, and sanctioning its own members if they were involved in less than honorable practices. For over a century, the AMA’s key directive was to rout out false medical practices and to establish national education for medical schools. Indeed, our own AEA is also a consumer advocate, is fearless in exposing fraud and ever vigilant in protecting the public.

It’s hard to imagine, but from 1840 until 1906, so-called patent medicines ruled the medical landscape. These incredible hoaxes were brewed-up elixirs that often contained more than 50 percent alcohol, morphine and cocaine! Some of these “medicines” were supposed to cure alcoholism! Unscrupulous medical doctors made fortunes selling potions, fake devices and running corrupt medical clinics. By today’s standards, these charlatans became billionaires and built luxurious mansions. Many used their ill-gotten fortunes to enter legitimate businesses - such as Gaylor Wilshire, who became a real estate tycoon while selling worthless “magnetic healing devices.” (Yes, that’s the same Wilshire of the famous Los Angeles “Wilshire Boulevard - Miracle Mile!”)

In the early days, the clergy, which was well respected, often gave testimonials to patent medicines. Fearlessly, and with little popular support, the AMA took on the clergy. Newspapers and magazines made fortunes advertising worthless nostrums; again the AMA demanded honesty in advertising - and eventually prevailed. Eventually, with the aid of brave journalists, political leaders and sheer will power, the AMA prevailed and in 1906, the United States passed its first national laws requiring honest labeling of medicines. Later the Food and Drug Administration was established; largely by the efforts of the AMA. I hope you see the parallels here and support the efforts of our own AEA to both protect the public and establish national standards.

The following are a few direct quotations from the book *The Golden Age of Quackery*, by Stewart H. Holbrook (1958).

**1800s:** “The tendency of ministers of the gospel to speak a good word for patent medicines in the public print had soon been apparent ...Back in 1840, the Connecticut Medical Society passed a sharply worded resolution calling attention to the fact that ‘the clergy, who have been recipients of free medical attention seem to be turning a penny by endorsing quack medicines,’ and demanded physicians ‘discontinue free attention unless clergymen withdrew their endorsements of patent medicines’.”

**1900-1950:** “John Adams (Collier’s reporter against quackery) thought the physicians seemed to have ‘awakened, if somewhat tardily,’ to counterattack the nostrum makers. He cited the American Medical Association, which had ‘organized a Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry, to investigate and pass on the ethical preparations advertised to physicians.’ The

council had already issued some 'painfully frank reports on products of imposing quackery'."

**1909:** American Medical Association took on the post office, demanding that they discontinue shipping quack drugs and worthless mechanisms. The journal chided the post office and "turned the spotlight of publicity into the dark pit of quackery and made clear the miserable fraud inseparable from it."

**1914:** "...on the Oxpathor, a metal disk attached to the leg that was said to supply oxygen to the body and cure everything. *AMA Journal* said this was a 'cruel and criminal lie.' The AMA spoke tartly of the registered physicians and listed their names in the *Journal* who had permitted their names to be used in "this very elaborate and ingenious separating the fool from his money." This remedy resurfaced in 1952, with great public condemnation from the AMA.

**1925:** Dr. Hostetter's Bitters (developed by a medical doctor) - a combination of 52% alcohol, sulphur, vinegar, morphine and "Indian Herbs." Actually, this was a very popular drink, said to cure alcoholism. "In 1920, the American Medical Association brought public and government attention to bear on the still generous amount of drugs and alcohol in Dr. Hostetter's and noted its medicinal content was fiction." (The AMA won, and the Bitters became a "soft drink" - like Coca-Cola.)

**1926:** "Being fearless of anyone, the AMA went after none other than Gaylord Wilshire (wealthy Los Angeles real estate tycoon): The *Journal* exposed Wilshire's quack medicine and described his machine in the following way: '...she (patient seen on the label) reclines on a fashionable couch. Around her neck and body the Wilshire Ring - the 'magic Horse Collar,' is plugged into a stylish standing lamp with fringe; while the IONACO has not only given her hair a remarkable sheen, but also a natural permanent wave." (Wilshire's device was supposed to cure "everything including cancer and 'women's problems' by bringing oxygen into the body." - It didn't do anything at all except make Wilshire rich!)

**1927:** American Medical Association took on Radio, demanding they discontinue advertising quack medicine. (The issue was "Peruna"). The AMA observed "this alcoholic nostrum, the most conspicuous of all medical frauds, seems to have taken on a new lease of life due to radio advertising" (Peruna was said to cure head, lungs, stomach liver, kidneys, bladder, pelvic and all forms of catarrh.)