

Questions of Quackery



This Year's Pearson Lecture Walks the Wacky Side of Health Care

Perhaps you'd like to regrow a limb or regenerate an organ? No problem if you can nab a Solerama Bedboard. How about sending radio waves to a person to cure their disease? The Curtherator can do just that. Too good to be true? Well, they are. These are just two examples of "medical quackery" devices that for centuries have passed themselves as science, intrigued the public and made millionaires of their inventors.

Dr. Bob McCoy (photo 1) paraded these bizarre but intriguing devices at the School of Medicine's seventh annual Emmett Pearson Memorial Medical History Lecture with his presentation, "PT Barnum Was Right: Medical Devices and Public Gullibility."

Dr. McCoy is the founder and former curator of The Museum of Questionable Devices, "a museum dedicated to lies, deception and question-

able truths" now at the Science Museum in St. Paul, Minn. (www.mtn.org/~quack)

A charming and witty speaker, "Dr. Bob" had the large audience rollicking with laughter as he demonstrated more than a dozen devices of medical chicanery, including a SpectroChrome (1920), which claimed that pure and intense colored light could cure patients of almost any disease. "People had to sit in front of it, facing north, in the nude," Dr. Bob quipped.

Dr. Bob wasn't shy about enlisting audience participation, even getting Pearson Museum Director Phillip Davis, Ph.D., to demonstrate the phrenology machine (1905) (photo 2). Looking like a madcap salon hair dryer, the device measures the size of bumps on the head as a supposed indicator of intelligence.

Magnetism, electricity, radio

waves — any scientific advancement was used to harness curative powers. The prostate gland warmer (1918) (photo 3), a nine-foot cord with a four-inch probe at one end and a blue light bulb at the opposite end that promised to "stimulate the abdominal brain;" the Toftness Radiation Detector, made of PVC piping and couplings, two fraudulent weight-loss devices: "Roll a Ray" and Vision Dieter glasses, which were just tinted laboratory goggles (photo 4), a foot-operated breast enlarger and a "manhood belt" (photo 5).

"What you're seeing is a history of science," said Dr. Bob's wife, Margaret McCoy, M.D. "Every time a new scientific advance is made, someone manages to turn it into quackery. It doesn't take long for people to enrich themselves, purporting to be scientific about it." ■