

BARNUM UNDERESTIMATED

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There seems to be a general disenchantment these days with our bewildering oversupply of technological sophistication and computerized specialization. The trend toward anti-science is particularly evident in the under-thirty generation whose interest in astrology, zodiacal soothsaying and Eastern mysticism has been booming. Apparently, the more enlightened and superficially educated we become, the greater the urge to distrust science, discount facts and revert to the more credulous reassurance of back-fence wisdom and superstition. As a branch of science, modern medicine also has some burdens to bear.

In the field of medicine and health, the gullible have always been with us. Television and Madison Avenue have displaced the carney pitchmen, repackaged the tonic waters and snake oil, and expanded the patent medicine business to unbelievable proportions. Faith healing and the "science" of chiropractic flourish as never before. New cancer cure swindles appear regularly. The copper bracelet craze for arthritis and aching joints is still here and going strong. If some clever entrepreneur could just get his hands on a few pounds of genuine, radioactive moon dust, he could become a millionaire overnight.

Southern California, the land of kooks and paradise of quackery, has always been a testing ground for health faddism. In the late twenties there, bottled spring waters, fresh fruit, tomatoes, raw vegetables, "roughage," and whole wheat bread were served at every table with religious ritualism. Ten years ago, Rachel Carson's book, "The Silent Spring," rekindled a spark among the jaded intellectuals that set into motion the pollution and ecology fanatics and stimulated dormant food faddists into ecstatic activity. There is hardly a sociology major or relevant "in person" alive today who doesn't pay homage to health foods or organic gardening. Not even the knowledge that food shortages, hunger, malnutrition, and disease are the standard realities in those areas of Asia and Africa where farming is necessarily "organic" discourages the enthusiasts.

Countless nutritional specialists, past and present, have demonstrated convincingly that the content of vitamins and essential minerals is no different in foods grown organically or inorganically. Blindfold a health food believer and, unless he happens to bite into a natural organic worm, his chance of distinguishing the taste of a fresh tomato grown in compost from that of one grown in scientifically treated soil is nil. The health food idiot willingly travels far out of his way to pay \$4.60 for 100 tablets of Vitamin C made from the exotic "natural source" of rose hips instead of 68 cents for the same amount of ascorbic acid at the corner drug store.

Currently, an even more fashionable interest, the ancient Chinese practice of

acupuncture, intrigues the effete intelligentsia. Acupuncture was supposedly developed by the Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, who lived from 2698 to 2598 B.C. Solid needles of different metals and varying sizes (now modernized to fine wire needles of stainless steel) are inserted at some of the more than 350 strategic points along the 12 pairs of invisible channels under the skin through which course the celestial Ying and the earthly Yang. Allegedly, all diseases may be benefited by acupuncture, but it is especially suited to cholera, dysentery and arthritis. Under the persuasive influence of Chairman Mao, *New York Times* editor James Reston, and *LIFE* magazine, its therapeutic powers have recently been extended into wider fields including postoperative distension and anesthesia.

By no stretch of any imagination can the hard facts of anatomy, neuroanatomy, and physiology be made to conform with the theory of acupuncture. Explanation can be sought only in the obtuse pseudo-science of psychology. Lacking an adequate supply of scientifically trained modern physicians, China has revived and fostered folk medicine and made a virtue of necessity. Folk medicine is better than no medicine at all, if only for its psychic effect. It is well known that any remedy, acupuncture included, will effectively influence symptoms in four out of every ten complainers. And it is this 40% of placebo reactors who constitute the meat and potatoes that nourish all forms of medical charlatanism.

"Don't dismiss this too abruptly. It's been around almost as long as the Chinese . . . and a lot of sane Western doctors believe in its efficacy," writes an intelligent newspaper publisher who graduated from Andover and Yale. Well, the Indians along the Ganges have been around as long as the Chinese and they claim equal efficacy for a mixture of curd, cow dung, butter and urine. It could be that a combination of this treatment with acupuncture might do wonders for some of our starry-eyed intellectuals.

The favorite designation of former cynic H. L. Mencken for the great, gullible American public was booboisie. In the days before boob was linked to tube, or to the bouncy bulbous appendages of our monthly "playmates," the term was applied primarily to any simple-minded bumpkin who was the natural prey of unscrupulous slickers. Since Mencken's era, the population explosion along with the overall deterioration of mass education has insured an everlasting supply of idiots and a greatly expanded booboisie. A hundred years ago, P. T. Barnum observed that there was a sucker born every minute; his estimate should at least be doubled today.