

Attacking 'Health Robbers'

By B. S. Herrington

FOR SOMEONE who has earned a reputation as one of the toughest adversaries of health quackery, psychiatrist Stephen Barrett, M.D., in person is something of an understatement.

His build is slight, and he speaks quietly and evenly, occasionally breaking into a smile or laugh. His hands emphasize a point; an irregularly tapping foot a slight impatience. Mild, inwardly confident, he presents a puzzling first impression when one is expecting the Serpico of the health profession.

Only one who has become the target of a lobbying campaign or undercover investigation by Barrett and the group he founded, the Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud, Inc., in Allentown, Pa.—for instance the chiropractor he forced to return \$13,575 to three cheated patients, or the person he recently arrested for false advertising—, quickly recognizes what formidable opposition he is. Drawing on his psychiatric background, a half-completed correspondence course in law, and his studies of communication, Barrett analyzes his opposition and allies, breaks down their defenses, and gets things done.

He came to Washington, D.C., on January 3 for two reasons. The first was to testify before the Federal Trade Commission that the word "organic" should be banned from all food advertising. The second, perhaps as important, was to publicize a recently published book that he co-edited, *The Health Robbers* (George F. Stickley Co., Philadelphia, Pa.).

The 340-page volume is unusual not only because it is apparently the first time anyone has dared to undertake a comprehensive exposé of quackery, but because all profits from the book will be recycled to fight quackery.

Edited by Barrett and Gilda Knight, executive assistant of the American Institute of Nutrition and managing editor of the AIN's *Nutrition Notes*, who each contributed a chapter or more, the book tries to help consumers differentiate experts from pretenders, find reliable medical information, and hopefully put quacks out of business. It is written in a clear informative and readable style.

It is also aptly titled; a contention appearing throughout the book is that quacks virtually rob their victims of good health by preventing them from seeking legitimate medical help. This point is painfully and dramatically demonstrated in the first chapter, which is on cancer quackery. It recounts the story of an eight-year-old girl afflicted with a tumor of the eye. Scheduled for surgery to remove the eye and surrounding tissue, the girl was removed from the hospital by her parents on the advice of a chiropractor who promised to cure her with vitamins, food supplements, and laxatives. Within three weeks, the tumor had grown so large that it pushed out the girl's eye from the socket, ending hopes of saving her. She died in a few months, and the chiropractor was sentenced to prison for second-degree murder.

Succeeding chapters cover frauds in specific areas: patent medicines, arthritis, gadgets, dieting, sex clinics, health food promoters and "organic" foods, chiropractic, eye treatment, dentistry, faithhealing. The topics are not confined to specific ailments and remedies, however. The book lists good sources of medical information and explains how consumers can spot

quacks or "marginal medics" and how they can get the most from their physicians. It also probes why quackery exists, why it is not exposed more by the media, and how both consumers and the medical profession can fight or prevent it.

About the only topic not covered is quackery in the mental health field, but this was neither an oversight nor a deliberate omission. The commissioned chapter, according to Barrett, lacked sufficient case histories and practical advice, and a chapter on phony sex clinics, written by William Masters, M.D., was used instead.

What drives Stephen Barrett to devote an average 20 hours per week battling health quackery over and above his work in two base service units, one state hospital, one partial hospitalization unit, and a private office while still finding time to be with his wife and three children? "I don't know why I'm such a crusader," he says. "I guess I have a feeling that people who have the ability have a moral obligation to use it to make the world a better place to live in . . . as I grew up and prepared for adult living I had no interest in the world whatever. I was only interested in playing and eventually getting my medical degree and earning a living."

At the age of 30, however, he began "to look around," getting involved in prison reform in California. Then a book by Ralph Lee Smith entitled *At Your Own Risk, The Case Against Chiropractic* ignited his crusading spirit. "It just made me furious," Barrett recalls. "I said, 'My God, here in my own field of health there's organized crime.'" He laughs self-consciously and quickly clarifies, "I don't feel that way any more, but that was my initial reaction."

A year later Barrett's anger over chiropractic fused with that of local dentists at anti-fluoridationists. Through a series of lunches with interested persons in the community and with the blessing of the local medical society, he organized the Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud, Inc., to help defeat Blue Shield coverage of chiropractic and to persuade the Allentown City Council to fluorinate



Stephen Barrett, M.D.

date local drinking water.

The expansion of the committee's influence beyond the state paralleled that of its membership to 40 health professionals, legal experts, and other citizens. Now a network of 35, the committee investigates and reports health frauds and advertising, organizes letter writing campaigns, acts as a clearinghouse for information on quackery, places articles in scientific and lay publications, provides speakers. Over the years it has been in touch with over 2,000 persons across the country and manages to place in the media about four articles a month. It has influenced the initiation of three similar groups in Canada and northern and southern California.

Barrett's original difficulty in having anti-quackery stories published in the media set the scene for the writing of the book. He explained the difficulties: "It's a combination of fear of offending advertisers in some areas, fear of being sued, mostly fear of just having trouble. . . , controversy, . . . [or] lack of interest. In other cases it's just that 50,000 people may be communicating in one direction and only a few scientific people communicating in our direction. . . . There's a lot of money involved. There's no money involved in telling people the truth, or very little."

The idea for the book sprouted from these obstacles and from the files of a retired professor of the Mayo Clinic who, after devoting a year of retirement, abandoned his attempted book on nutrition quackery.

Says Barrett: "All of a sudden, I had a flash of insight." He realized no one person could write the book. It would mean paying a top writer \$50,000 for two years of full-time work. Hence the idea to round up a team of authors, each writing a chapter in his own specialization.

One of the main reasons the book has been able to go beyond others to attack health quackery is its built-in safeguards. "We were very careful, number one, and number two, I don't think it would be to the advantage of

most of the people we attack to sue us because it would only publicize what they're doing wrong," Barrett commented. Should the authors be sued individually, money sitting in the Pennsylvania Medical Society Quackery Defense Fund would prevent the book from being destroyed. The committee itself has no assets. (The defense fund accumulated from voluntary contributions by physicians in Pennsylvania. Barrett has and is trying to start a similar fund within the American Psychiatric Association to fight suits on behalf of patients and psychiatrists, and to cover those who expose questionable practices.)

Quackery is not in demise. It exists, the book points out, partially because laws and prosecuting agencies cannot keep up with it and because of general consumer ignorance and desire for more than medicine can give.

Other reasons for its thriving, however, contain direct implications for change by the medical profession. These are, the book observes, the bad image of organized medicine, which is seen by consumers as working only "for its own economic and political self-interest"; the often brusque, patronizing attitude of physicians compared with the quack's attentiveness and semblance of caring for the person; and the sometimes superficial screening of physicians when they apply for licenses and staff positions.

Medical journalist Max Gunther, in his chapter, also laments that there is no "countervailing" push in the direction of "sound, carefully researched medical reporting," and advises the medical profession to make legitimate spokesmen and rebuttals to quackery as easy for the journalist to find as the quacks do.

But there is no substitute for an informed public. As the book notes: "The sad fact is that people can easily be frightened by things which they do not understand and can easily be confused by contradictory arguments. . . . The best protection against fraud is an informed consumer."