

## Medical Quackery, Past and Present, by Alan Rumrill

A well-known televangelist was recently sued to stop promoting a so-called cure for COVID-19 and an actor was arrested by the FBI for marketing what he called a coronavirus prevention pill. These are just two of numerous examples of someone trying to prey upon the fears of individuals by offering seemingly miraculous medical cures during the current pandemic. This practice is often referred to as medical quackery. Quack cures and medical procedures were much more common in the 19th century than they are today, including here in southwest New Hampshire. This resulted from the lack of regulations and laws related to medicines and medical practices, as well as a more limited understanding of disease and its treatment. Many doctors and medicine manufacturers were honestly working to assist those with physical ailments, but many others were unscrupulous quacks who were simply trying to make a buck by offering so-called cures to those who were in pain or lived in fear of becoming ill.

Much of the historical quackery here and across the country related to medical cures and remedies. Countless patent medicines were introduced during the 1800s that were heavily advertised as cure-alls and were available over-the-counter, but often had no true effectiveness against the maladies they were supposed to treat. Patent medicines often contained a large amount of alcohol, even those advertised for use by children. Some contained other addictive drugs as well, such as cocaine or morphine. The medicines might make a patient feel better temporarily, because the effect of the drugs they contained was simply masking the symptoms of the real ailments.



*Seaver's Joint and Nerve Liniment*

Thomas Seaver moved to Walpole, New Hampshire from Massachusetts in 1803. He opened an apothecary shop on Walpole's Main Street. Seaver sold chemicals, dye, soap, perfume, paint, oil, and black ink that he made himself, but most of his business consisted of compounding and selling drugs and medicines. One of his medicines gained a large following. Seaver named his remedy "Seaver's Joint and Nerve Liniment." An 1845 advertisement claimed that the liniment would cure rheumatism, sprains, weak joints, pain in the back, breast, loins, or any part of the body. Labels on the bottles themselves added the claim that it would also cure gout, bruises, weak nerves, and all cases of external injury. The liniment sold for 25 cents per bottle. Bitters

was a common 19th century patent medicine, generally consisting of herbs and other botanical substances steeped in alcohol and water. Bitters has been used as an aid to digestion, but many manufacturers claimed that their tonic could do much more than that. A few brands of bitters were produced, bottled and sold in the Monadnock region. One of those was Dr. Jewett's Celebrated Health Restoring Bitters, made by Stephen Jewett of Rindge in the mid-1800s. Jewett marketed the medicine successfully and opened a main distribution office in Boston. The labels on Jewett's bottles stated that the

bitters would cure chronic diseases, cancer, all disorders of the blood, skin, and digestive organs, liver and kidney complaints, “female weaknesses,” and many other disabilities. In fact, the label claimed that “all can be cured if within the power of medicine.”

The term “quack” derives from a word meaning someone who boasts about themselves, and there were indeed quack “doctors” in the region as well. In June of 1815 a man calling himself “the famous Dr. Dexter” arrived in Keene and opened an office in Sumner’s Tavern. He purchased an advertisement in the Sentinel inviting local residents to make appointments to receive treatment from him at the Tavern. Among the 22 specialties he listed in the advertisement were cancer, jaundice, tape worms, whooping cough, dysentery, deafness, and female complaints of all descriptions. He also claimed he had been in business for 13 years. He soon had so many customers that he decided to stay in the area; he purchased a house and opened an office in Roxbury.

In October of 1816 Dexter was brought to trial in Keene on a charge of malpractice. Late the previous year he had examined the sore ankle of a patient, diagnosed it as cancer, and proclaimed that he could cure it. To do so he applied a caustic that destroyed the flesh and muscle to the bone. When cutting out the sore, he also cut tendons and destroyed the use of the patient’s foot. Another doctor testified that a true doctor would have known that the sore was not cancer and that the treatment was very improper. The jury awarded the injured patient a settlement of \$400. Two months later the Sentinel reported that “the famous Dr. Dexter” had been living in Buffalo three years earlier where he was known as Luther Gothro, a shoemaker, and that he had fled from that city just before he was to stand trial for criminal misconduct. Sadly, the injured patient died six months later, and “Dr. Dexter” disappeared from the region. Unfortunately, medical quackery was all too common here in the 19th century. However, the damage done by patent medicines to patients whose pain they were supposed to relieve and the horror stories of harm inflicted by quacks such as Dr. Dexter resulted in new regulations and laws to protect patients and govern the practice of medicine. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 was the first of a series of laws enacted by Congress to control adulterated or mislabeled food and drug products. Furthermore, developments in medical technology, the acceptance of the germ theory, and the introduction of licensing regulations vastly improved the medical field. Unfortunately, medical quackery still exists; it has simply changed form, as we have seen during the current outbreak. Perhaps the best advice is that if a medicine or a procedure seems too good to be true, it probably is.



*Dr. Jewett's Celebrated  
Health Restoring Bitters*