



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Healthy Skepticism

"SKINNY PILL" SCAM

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

The Holy Grail of the overweight has always been the pill or potion that would allow effortless weight loss without the need to alter one's eating and exercise habits. Cliff Sheats' claims (detailed in the July issue of *The Skeptic*) are a recent example that comes to mind. Other approaches have also been tried: thyroid hormone and amphetamines, for example. In the 19th century, "sanitized" tapeworms were sold as an effortless weight loss remedy. And in the days of the early Romans, bingeing and purging were all the rage.

Now comes a new gimmick, chromium. This trace metal is a known cofactor for insulin, an important hormonal regulator of carbohydrate metabolism. There's even some evidence that a relative deficiency state is associated with impairments of carbohydrate metabolism such as diabetes. But so far it's just that: an association. Whether low chromium causes diabetes or vice-versa or neither has yet to be settled. But don't think that the scientific method is going to keep the quacks from bilking the public.

The promoters of a chromium supplement called "Herbal Energizer," for example, claim that it's a "revolutionary breakthrough" that "make[s] your body more sensitive to the hormone insulin...improv[ing] your metabolism so that your body relies more on using stored fat and less on stored proteins," so that you can lose weight while eating however you please. Hedging themselves, the product's promoters also claim that it "makes other sensible weight control efforts more effective." But maybe that has to do with the other ingredients in the supplement, such as ephedra (a mild stimulant) and guarana, a source of caffeine.

Similar outrageous claims are being made for another chromium supplement, Trichromaleane. These sorts of products are commonly sold through multi-level marketing schemes and this one is no exception. The company entices distributors by claiming to offer "the most lucrative plan in the industry [with] numerous people [being] on their way to 5- and 6-figure incomes." Nor do I doubt that, for the few people at the top of the marketing pyramid, these products very likely are effective ways of boosting cash flow and improving bank account balances.

Curiously, insulin has been regarded as a prime villain by many diet book authors since (to oversimplify) it's the body's signal that there's plenty of food around. So while it tends to reduce the amount of glucose production by the liver (from protein), it also inhibits the mobilization of stored fats. Why the quacks never thought to pitch a product that reduces the body's sensitivity to insulin on this basis, I'm not sure.

At any rate, the most dangerous aspect of these supplements is not that they are simple rip-offs. It is that they may lead diabetics and other individuals with impaired glucose tolerance to substitute self-experimentation for proper medical care. For despite the hints about the possible role of chromium in these disorders, there is no evidence that chromium supplements are generally indicated, effective or safe in the management of diabetes. Nevertheless, the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud has already been made aware of at least one case in which a mother tried to use a chromium-containing supplement as a means of reducing the insulin dosage required by her diabetic child.

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This past June, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued an advance notice of its proposed regulation of "dietary supplements" under the Nutritional Labeling and Education Act of 1990. This is the basis for the renewed clamor among "health food" disciples that the FDA is supposedly going to outlaw vitamins. In reality, the proposed rules would require supplement labels to include a panel carrying the same sort of information that currently is required on processed foods.

It's anticipated that health claims would be permitted to the extent that there is "significant agreement among qualified experts" that the claims are scientifically valid. Though not unreasonable, this is a far less stringent requirement than that which the FDA demands of prescription medications. In addition, rightly concerned about amino acids, herbal preparations about which little is known, fiber products, and items not generally recognized as foods such as enzymes, trace elements, and the like, the FDA is seeking additional information from manufacturers about the safety of these preparations.

But the health food and supplement industry has shown little inclination to cooperate, probably because the firms selling the snake oils haven't any such information. They may even believe their own hype. Evidently, they're continuing to count on Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch to help them continue their deceptive practices.

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Researchers at the Harvard Medical Schools recently reported the results of their eight-year study of 89,494 women examining the relationship between vitamins A, C, and E and the risk of breast cancer. The study, reported in the July 22 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, showed no protective effect of vitamins C or E but did find a reduced relative risk of breast cancer among women who took vitamin A supplements. The size of the effect, though, suggested that women who have an adequate dietary intake of this vitamin would not benefit from supplements.

Vitamin A itself is found only in animal products such as dairy items, liver, and some fish, but beta carotene, which is converted to vitamin A in the body, is widely found in such plant-derived foods as green leafy vegetables, carrots, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and papaya. Red palm oil (produced and consumed in the tropics) is also rich in carotene.

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The new U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, deliberately oversaw the distribution of more than one million condoms that she knew had more than ten times the failure rate allowed by the FDA. Arkansas officials, in fact, blocked FDA seizure of the defective condoms which were subsequently distributed free and without any of the recipients being told of the problem.

Undoubtedly, the faulty reasoning employed was that anyone who accepts a free condom from the government is incapable of purchasing a Trojan on their own initiative at the local pharmacy, a novel justification for health fraud. But the result was that numerous people relied on contraceptive and disease-control benefits that were substandard. Unfortunately, it's impossible even for the victims of this duplicity to know who they are.

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000.

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and an NTS Technical Advisor.

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Last month, I talked about the half-baked ideas of summer. At this writing, we are in about our 60th rainless day of temperatures above 100 degrees, and the half-baked ideas of July have hardened into the overcooked delusions of August. Cases in point ...

After years of development and close to a billion dollars in research, the Mars Observer space probe blinked out and disappeared just hours before it was to begin sending pictures back from Mars. A group of scientists, led by Robert Hoagland, formerly of NASA, claims that the probe is working fine, but the space agency deliberately pulled the plug because it doesn't want us to see all the remnants of a long-gone civilization on Mars. This group says that NASA knows there are signs of life on Mars, but they won't say so because they fear the reaction of Christian fundamentalist groups (apparently, the famous "face" on Mars has been identified as Ozzie Osbourne). Mars Observer Project Manager Glenn Cunningham called the claim "absolutely the craziest thing I've ever heard."

But he must admit, it is not so crazy to fear the wrath of Christian fundamentalists, who will wipe you right off the map if they don't like you. At least, that's what they tried to do in Gaston County, North Carolina. The Wilmington, North Carolina, Star-News reported that a group of parents in that county were demanding Africa and Germany be removed from maps and globes in local classrooms because they believe those places are anti-Christian. Perhaps they can be moved to Mars ... and the solar map can be rearranged to show the entire universe revolving around Gaston County, North Carolina. Incidentally, the parents were also calling for the suppression of Greek letters from the curriculum because they believe their use constitutes an endorsement of homosexuality. Think about that the next time you drive down fraternity row at SMU.

So here's the conundrum: who do you side with in this argument? The advocates of life on Mars? The fundamentalists who want to edit the map to make it more pleasing to their own viewpoint? Or the guys at NASA who shot a billion dollars of our tax money into a black hole?

Frankly, I think they've all been out in the sun too long.

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Speaking of religion and outer space, the London *Daily Telegraph* reports on a state-of-the-art observatory in Arizona which is jointly operated by NASA and the Vatican. The paper says that the telescope searches distant galaxies for NASA ... and if it happens to find any humanoids out there, the Catholic Church is prepared to baptize them. I guess the shortage of priests is worse than I thought ... they're looking for candidates in outer space. This could explain why the Pope wears that tall hat. Could he be ... a Conehead?!!!

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More Texas heat-inspired delirium was displayed recently in Vinton, Louisiana, when a 1990 Pontiac Grand Am filled with 20 naked Pentacostals led police on a chase, then crashed into a tree. None were injured ... they just jumped out of the car and began doing religious chants. Their preacher, who was driving, said that the Lord had instructed them to leave all their clothes, I.D.s, and money in Galveston and drive to Florida. They should have done it during Spring Break ... they probably wouldn't have been noticed.

Anyway, by the next day, the preacher came to his senses and apologized, telling the judge that he now realizes it wasn't God who told them to get naked and drive through Louisiana (So who was it? Jimmy Swaggart?). They were charged with a misdemeanor traffic offense and released to their relatives in Galveston, who must now be explaining to the neighbors that "nothing comes between me and my Calvinists."

Man, it must be even hotter in Galveston than it is here!

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The Associated Press reports that a team of scientists in Taos, New Mexico, have failed to locate the source of the mysterious "Taos Hum," a low-frequency sound that only some people can hear. They will next turn their attention to the people who hear it, to see if they have a super-sensitivity to electromagnetic fields. Those who can hear the Taos hum say it begins abruptly, interferes with sleep, and can cause dizziness, headaches and nosebleeds. Personally, with those symptoms, I'd check to see if the next door neighbors were playing a Michael Bolton album.

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A new experiment is under way in Antarctica, where they don't have the excuse of intense heat to explain scrambled thought processes. It's a joint venture between American and Australian environmental science groups to determine whether "the greenhouse effect" is warming the waters around Antarctica. Their five-year mission: to weigh penguins and see if they get fatter. What does global warming have to do with weighing penguins? Let me explain, as best I can recap it from the AP wire story ...

If the greenhouse effect is real, then the water around Antarctica should be warming. If it is warming, then more fish and plankton should be growing in it. If more fish and plankton are available, then penguins (who eat these things) would probably get fatter, penguins not being noted for calorie-counting (the story didn't mention that if the weather is getting warmer, the penguins might lose some fat, but never mind). Anyway, a big, truckstop-style scale is being constructed so the penguins can be weighed as they waddle from the ice to the ocean buffet and back again. This experiment will take five fascinating years.

Now, you are probably asking yourself, "If the idea is to find out whether the water is getting warmer, why not just stick a thermometer in the water?" To which I would reply, "You spoilsport! We're creating penguin-weighing jobs here! Besides, try getting grant money to stick a thermometer in the water!"

To be perfectly fair, there may be all sorts of brilliant scientific reasons that this experiment is not as incredibly goofy as it sounds. I can't think of any, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. And I confess that as a bird lover, I kind of like the idea of someone being that concerned about the health of penguins. Say, maybe they could get a grant to open a Jenny Craig outlet for them!

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Last month, I talked about a book on the phenomenon of people seeing Elvis everywhere. Well, another new book has an interesting theory on that subject. In "Elvis People: Cult Of The King," former BBC religious reporter Ted Harrison makes the argument that the Elvis cult may be a "religion in embryo," and we could be experiencing something similar to the early days of Christianity.

To make his case, Harrison lists a number of similarities between the Elvis cult and Christians. For example: Elvis fans have rewritten the story of Elvis' birth to resemble that of the Nativity, and found all sorts of supernatural twists in it. They make pilgrimages to Graceland. They treat his scarves as holy relics, some of which have been said to cure diseases. They claim Elvis predicted his own death, and appeared to his followers after his death. And some fans even echo Christian rhetoric by stating that "it is possible not only to love Elvis, but to be loved by Elvis, and to have a personal relationship with him."

Especially if you work at Burger King.

Harrison even left out a few other startling similarities. For instance: Country singers used to do songs about Jesus, now they do songs about Elvis ... Jesus sought out thieves and prostitutes, Elvis played Las Vegas ... Colonel Parker sold Elvis out for 30 million pieces of silver ... the list goes on and on! Someday, perhaps Robert Tilton will be preaching the gospel of Elvis, which will make him seem less hypocritical when he buys a dozen new Cadillacs.

Truly, this man was "the King of Kings."

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Finally, to polish off my "baking" metaphor ... and also to please those thousands of readers who complain that I don't include enough cooking tips ... I pass along the following item, from the Asahi News Service of Japan:

Some large food companies in Japan are trying to convince consumers to pay extra for bread and noodles because the ingredients were exposed to classical

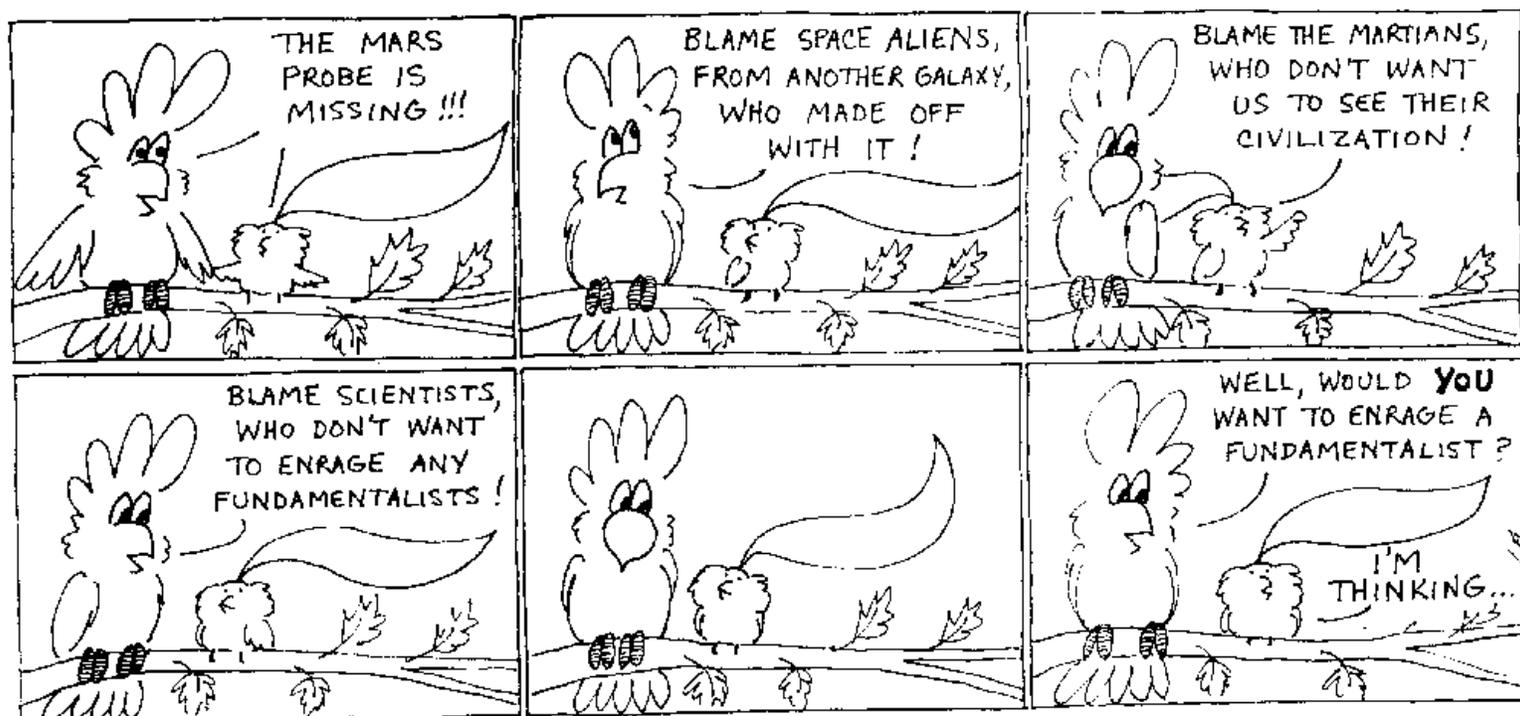
music. They claim that the music of Beethoven and Vivaldi makes enzyme and yeast fungus activity in the dough more lively, which makes bread and noodles taste better. Somehow, they claim to have discovered that noodles "prefer" Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," mixed with the sounds of birds chirping. I don't know if any scientific experimentation was conducted to discover what kind of music noodles prefer ... if, for example, they tried rap music and ended up with tough noodles, or played Barry Manilow and got limp noodles.

I do wonder, though, if Beethoven inspires yeast to grow, whether cello players have more yeast infections than the average person.

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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