

FEATURE - ALTERNATIVE THERAPY

Vinegar Can be Used for What?

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Want to get rich quick? Join the nutrition quackery promoters of fat mobilisers, amino acid tablets, cellulite treatments, food combining, digestive enzyme tablets, fantasy books (eg Fit for Life), weight loss fraud, protein powders, fake vitamins, magic nutrients, finding nonexistent allergies, vitamin B12 injections, cancer curing diets.... and the list goes on. Better still, create some new quackery. Success is measured by financial income, not health outcome.

A personal favourite is the recent advertising campaign for a book on the new 'superfood', vinegar. The advertisement makes the following statements:

"... scientific studies praise the curative and preventative powers of vinegar ..."

"Scientific tests show it's a natural storehouse of vitamins and minerals - over 93 different components - to fight what ails you and help extend life."

"You'll learn how to melt away pounds with a meal-time vinegar cocktail."

"Just one spoonful of apple cider vinegar is endowed with vitamins, minerals, enzymes, amino acids, nutrients and important pectin and beta carotene."

Whoops! That last one's a howler! Vinegar is a lousy source of essential nutrients. In fact, the Nutritional Value of Australian Foods, the US Department of Agriculture and the British food tables, McCance & Widdowson, all list vinegar as having no fibre (therefore no pectin), no vitamins (therefore no beta carotene), only a mere trace of calcium or iron, and the same amount of protein and amino acids as you will find in one teaspoon of bread crumbs or less (USDA claims nil protein - the number may have been rounded down).

The advertisement then lists 20 medicinal properties of vinegar, including:

- help lower cholesterol;
- forestall osteoporosis;
- help coughs and colds;
- lower high blood pressure;
- relieve night time leg cramps.

These are significant claims, all of which had evaded me in the last twenty years. I had to chuckle when it also listed the old quackery pearls "aids digestion", "improves metabolism" and "aids to maintain health". Nothing like some meaningless feel-good statements to pad out your list.

My first complaint went to the magazine that published the advertisement stating that it included lies, deception and quackery. The potentially most damaging problem was that the advert was illegal, due to the statement "You'll learn how to melt away pounds...". In the Slimming

Advertising Code (Media Council of Australia) it points out that "All advertising which includes a weight loss claim shall conform to the requirements of this Code". This advertisement doesn't.

Furthermore, the Code states: "All advertisements shall be subject to prior clearance by the relevant clearance office. With print media the clearance number allocated shall be displayed within the dimensions of the advertisement. Any advertisement which does not meet these criteria shall be deemed to be in breach of the Code". No relevant Australian Publishing Bureau clearance number was included with the advert.

The magazine replied quickly and reassured me that the advert would no longer be included. And guess who was peeved? The book's Australian distributor (Willow Tree Press) telephoned from Sydney, on 3 November and advised me against 'taking on Tresco Publishers (US)'. I thanked him for the warning.

On his second call he had calmed down somewhat (The greatest remedy for anger is delay - Seneca). I explained my great interest in the therapeutic powers of vinegar and could he please forward any scientific details, as these had never previously entered any public health discussion among health professionals. He offered to send me a copy of the Vinegar Book, guaranteed to answer my questions as there was a list of references at the back of the book.

And the answers were easy to find. They were on the inside front cover and on page 2. Allow me to quote:

"This book is intended as a record of folklore and historical solutions ..."

"No claims are intended as to the safety, or endorsing the effectiveness, of any of the remedies ..."

"... remember, these are only folk remedies, not scientifically proven cures! "

I repeat: "Not scientifically proven cures! " Now, that would have been a useful and honest statement to include in the advert.

Indeed, the author has our welfare at heart. We are told that "The Select Committee on Aging's Subcommittee on Health and Long Term Care (House of Representatives, 98th Congress) calls the marketing of supposed arthritis cures a \$10 billion a year scandal". It is much cheaper to use her arthritis remedy of " 1 teaspoon of honey and 1 teaspoon apple cider vinegar, mixed into a glass of water and taken morning and evening".

I looked at 14 of the references listed in the back of the book. Of these, 11 made no mention of vinegar; rather they referred to nutrients not found in vinegar. Two others referred to vinegar reducing the severity of jellyfish stings. This is well established and the Australian Red Cross First

Aid textbook (Times Mirror International publishers 1995 p170) recommends to “pour vinegar over the stung area to inactivate the stinging capsules”.

The final reference discussed the calcium content of soup stock with added vinegar (Hadfield *et al*, *J American Dietetic Assoc* 1989; 89: 1810-1811) where the author comments:

“The decrease in pH due to the addition of 60mL vinegar was insufficient to extract a significant amount of calcium from the bones.”

This is not the impression you get from reading page 18 of the book which implies vinegar added to soup "can make a difference in the calcium which is pulled from boiled soup bones". It is certainly bold of the author of the Vinegar Book to include a reference that refutes the very assertions she makes. Misrepresenting research findings is common in nutrition quackery (amino acids and body building is a wonderful example).

The very next sentence from this reference is “Nutrition misinformation can lead consumers into making choices that may result in serious consequences, as would be the case if an individual relied primarily on a vinegar-based soup stock as a source of dietary calcium. This study demonstrates the responsibility of the nutrition or health professional to evaluate nutrition information critically through direct research or thorough review of reputable literature in order to provide the public with the most accurate information available.” Precisely.

Footnote:

A complaint was also forwarded to the Advertising Standards Council, the advertising watchdog. Consequently the advertisement cannot be run in its current form. In a phone conversation with the Australian distributor, on 8.12.95 he said to me: “What you’ve done is a crying shame. You’ve done a lot of harm to people who could have been cured of ailments.”

The Vinegar book has sold 140,000 copies in Australia and, supposedly, 2.5 million worldwide. Oh, why was I born with scruples?

The Vinegar book. Emily Thacker. Tresco Publishers 1994
