

Let Me Explain Why

***Snake Oil And Other Preoccupations*, John Diamond, 2001 Vintage, UK Random House**

This is not a book to read in public unless the reader has a heart of flint. John Diamond is dead, and he knew he was dying when he wrote *Snake Oil*. The book is unfinished, with just six chapters completed. Diamond succumbed to a ghastly form of throat cancer in March 2001. He was working on his home computer when he collapsed and was rushed to hospital for the last time. His brother-in-law, Dominic Lawson, writes in his introduction to the book:

John's study on the day after his death presented an almost unbearably poignant sight: his computer screen still switched on, and there, flickering, as if with an extinguished intelligence, the last completed words of his book before he was rushed to hospital...

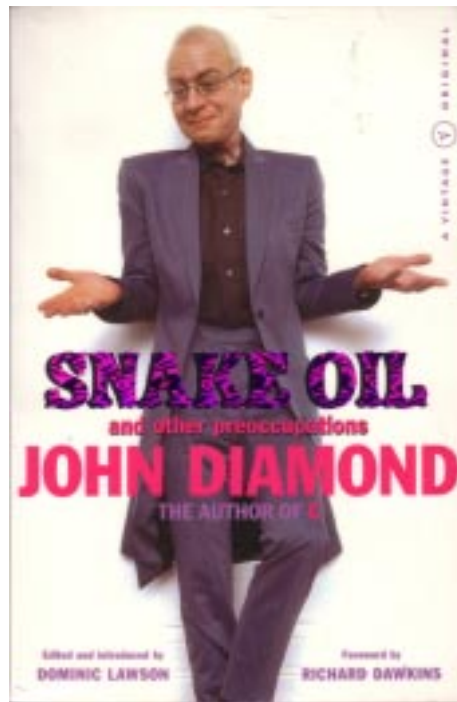
I would like to share those words with you:

I know, as if I'm doing that which I promised I wouldn't do, and using an attack on alternativism to defend the orthodoxy. In fact, I'm pretty sure that many more people die of their treatment in hospital than is necessary and that all over the developed world doctors are happily doling out prescriptions for pharmaceutical drugs which are useless or next to it. But that isn't my point, which is that in order to make their case, the alternativists feel the need to use this sort of propaganda. If homeopathy worked, then it would be worth using regardless of whether hospital doctors are knowingly killing off their patients: it is patently safer, cheaper and has fewer side-effects than orthodox medicine.

Let me explain why.

Diamond was a prolific British journalist, columnist and broad-

caster. He was married to, and had two children by, Nigella Lawson, a fellow journalist and popular cooking show hostess. He had a weekly column in *The Times*, and from the time of his diagnosis with cancer, he shared the disease's progress with his readers.



Many of his readers were involved in the snake-oil industry (or involved in complementary medicine, according to your viewpoint) and they contacted Diamond with advice on their cures. Diamond investigated many of these claims, and showed them to be without merit.

And yet, he opens Chapter Three with:

I'll come clean. I am an alternative practitioner myself, after a fashion. There: I've said it.

He explains that when his young son hurts himself, he:

[applies] strictly alternative remedies. I don't give him strong drugs to kill the pain or staunch the flow of

blood but I clean the tiny wound, ask him what happened, sympathise with him about the fickleness of gravity and the harshness of brick, sit him on my lap with a glass of water, kiss him and rub the hurt better. And it works, every time

Diamond can't decide whether to call this remedy Fatheratherapy or Dynamic parentesiology.

He highlights the tactics frequently used by the supporters of alternative therapies — attacking mainstream medicine. The false syllogism is along the following lines:

Western medicine is very bad, this is alternative medicine, therefore this is good.

And how often we sceptics are confronted with such false logic. Try:

Western medicine is very bad, this is alternative medicine, therefore this is even worse.

Both syllogisms are equally false.

Dozens of Diamond's columns from *The Times* are published in *Snake Oil*, and some of his earlier columns predating his cancer are a delight; crisp, incisive, and witty.

He bravely shared with his readers his fight against his smoking-induced throat cancer — the various surgeries, the removal of much of his tongue, his speech loss, his inability to eat. And incredibly, his continued smoking right up to the end, and how foolish he regarded the habit.

Richard Dawkins' perceptive and strongly supportive Foreword to *Snake Oil* is reproduced in his own new offering, *A Devil's Chaplain*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Snake Oil is one for every sceptic's library, a powerful tool to help wean the victims away from their expensive and evidence-free alternative therapies.

Richard Lead