

## Looking for Healthcare Miracles

The Integrative Medicine Center at Griffin Hospital opened last week. For the most part, things are working just as they were supposed to. Patients are being seen and evaluated by both conventionally trained physicians and naturopaths, and receiving recommendations for care based on consensus. But we have had one unpleasant experience. One patient was apparently very disappointed that the recommendations provided were similar to things she had tried before. Apparently she was hoping for something less familiar, more extreme. If you are not feeling well, you of course want to feel better. And anyone who tells you they can make you feel better will seem worth listening to. But all too often people who claim to have the answers when no one else does are simply selling something. It's relatively easy to claim to be an expert simply by refuting what others say. An excellent example of this is the current preoccupation with fad diets.

There is not a shred of scientific evidence to support the high-protein or high-fat diets being promoted in popular books. So what is the basis for their popularity? The simple fact that they are different. People who have tried and failed to control their weight with other diets are attracted to something that sounds different. But these diets for the most part are exploiting the vulnerability of people eager to try anything new. They produce short-term weight loss that never lasts, and the diets are not healthy.

Internet sites make outlandish health claims. Potions and pills are marketed with promises that cannot be fulfilled. Natural products are sold with claims that they are both superior to, and safer than, pharmaceutical agents. Pharmaceutical agents are advertised on TV. Yet much of this is simply good salesmanship. Not good medicine.

Unfortunately, whether you're buying a used car or seeking treatment for a medical problem, if it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Miracles don't happen often in medicine, and when they do it's not by design. Part of getting good health care is having appropriate expectations. Beware practitioners, of any type, who claim to have all the answers. Be wary of those who can immediately tell you what was wrong with every opinion you've had before. And always be cautious about claims that sound too much like miracles. Medicine is quite advanced at the dawn of the 21st century, but it still has along way to go. There is much that cannot be diagnosed yet, and much that if diagnosed cannot be adequately treated. These areas are challenges calling for creativity, compassion, and open-mindedness. But also honesty. If an effective treatment for a particular condition has not yet been established, then that is what you should be told. You should also get advice about what might work, and what the evidence supports. But when you suddenly meet the person who can guarantee to fix what everyone else has struggled with, it's often



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time to get nervous. There is much that is effective in modern medicine, but also much that is not. The same is true of alternative medicine. Those interventions that are effective only work for certain people under certain conditions. Matching individuals to the care most likely to work, based on the best available evidence and the opinion of experts from both conventional and alternative

medicine, is how the Integrative Medicine Center at Griffin Hospital works. Our hope and expectation is that this mechanism will lead to better health and satisfaction for most of our patients. But only a miracle worker can guarantee to make everyone feel completely better all of the time.

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*Preventive Medicine Column*

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