



## “Dr. Smith”

*Alternative Medicine, Herbal Remedies, and Dietary Supplements*

When we were kids, on many Saturday mornings, our mother would give my brother and me each 35 cents. It cost 5 cents each way to ride the Capitol Transit bus from home to Silver Spring and back. Admission to a double feature at the SECO Movie Theater cost 20 cents, and we had 5 cents left over for a box of candy! Mom had us “out of her hair” for most of the day so that she could get her many chores done.

Invariably, one of those double feature movies was a “grade B” western, and it seemed that most of the them had a part where “Dr. Smith” rolled into town in his wagon pulled by a mule. The wagon was quite colorful, touting his “elixir.” A crowd would gather, and he would give them his sales pitch about his elixir that would cure their baldness, ingrown toenails, and everything in between.

“Dr. Smith” is still out there hawking his elixir, but now it is called “Complimentary” or “Alternative Medicine,” “Herbal Medicine,” or “Dietary Supplements.” The claims for health benefits are still just as outrageous, and have little if any scientific merit. Criticism from the medical profession is invariably greeted with the claim that there is a conspiracy among doctors to keep this “cure” from the public. What bunch of baloney! Anything that we can recommend or do to help improve the health of our patients makes us look good in their eyes. We don’t lose business, because they send their family and friends to us as new patients.

### Facts

- Dietary “supplements” do not require FDA approval before marketing. The FDA can remove mislabeled or adulterated products from store shelves, but the burden of discovery and proof is entirely on the government.
- The FDA recently issued a warning to health professionals and consumers not to use a number of supplements ([www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). DRUGS found illegally in dietary supplements have included Viagra, Mevacor, Xanax, Indocin, Coumadin, Estrogen, and steroids. Chinese herbal weight loss products were found to contain a chemical that caused acute renal failure in about 100 women in Belgium. At least 70 required dialysis or kidney transplants (*The Medical Letter, Volume 50, Issue 1279, Feb 11, 2008*).
- These products can, and do, interact with prescription drugs:
  - St. John’s Wort: decreased birth control pill effectiveness, decreased carbamazepine (Tegretol) levels with increased seizure risk, decreased transplant drug level (tacrolimus), decreased cancer chemotherapy drug levels (vinca alkaloids), many others.

- Glucosamine: decreased effectiveness of insulin and other diabetes medications, increased risk of bleeding for patients on aspirin and other NSAIDs, many others.
- Gingko Biloba: decreased anticonvulsant effectiveness, increased risk of bleeding for patients on warfarin (Coumadin), interference with oral antidiabetic drugs, many others.

The list goes on and on...

- These products can, and do, cause side effects
  - St. John's Wort: abnormal dreams, anxiety, headache, sun sensitivity, skin rash, etc.
  - Glucosamine: constipation, diarrhea, drowsiness, headache, poor diabetic control, etc.
  - Gingko Biloba: bleeding disorders, convulsions, diarrhea, dizziness, allergic skin reactions, impaired fertility, etc.

The list goes on and on...

Bottom line... when I hear these companies tout their products as safe because they contain "all natural ingredients" it brings to mind what you find in a cow pasture!