

The Duct Tape of Health Care by Alan E. Smith

Prescription drugs are the duct tape of health care today. Just like the silver-sided wonder of home repairs drugs usually deal with the effects, not the real source of the problem. Duct tape used around the house can be a cheap, fast and easy solution to repair something that's broken. Drugs can keep you working but the problem is you become a drug addict in the process. They're also expensive, dangerous and the pharmaceutical industry wants to keep you a customer forever.

Duct tape is an amazing creation that can keep a pipe from leaking, hold things together and do many other household tasks quickly and cheaply. It wasn't designed to be a permanent repair for the most part, just to hold things together until something absolutely had to be repaired or replaced. It's amazing how long some of us manage to delay making permanent repairs as long as there is duct tape around!

Prescription drugs are quick and easy to take but they certainly aren't cheap. They also are a temporary repair to keep things working. They don't cure your health problem because there is more money to be made in keeping you a drug customer for life. Unfortunately when you take one drug there is often a side effect that requires you to take a second drug, which causes an additional side effect in turn that requires yet another drug and the process continues.

America is only one of two countries in the world that permit direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs. With only 4.3% of the world's population we consume nearly 50% of the world's prescription drugs. If we were the healthiest people on earth that would be fine but we rank #29 in the world for longevity today, much worse in many other categories. At the same time we spend more on health care than any other nation on earth at 16.3% of our GDP in 2007. Clearly America's prescription drug based medical system isn't working, except to profit the pharmaceutical industry.

Mainstream medicine used to prescribe mercury and other heavy metals to patients but we're much smarter now. We know that those substances will kill you. One hundred years from now (hopefully sooner) we'll figure out that the current crop of medications are also toxic. There are so many drugs on the market today with so many possible interactions and long-term effects that no one really knows what they're doing to Americans. We are simply profitable guinea pigs for the pharmaceutical industry. The government is doing such a great job of protecting you that the number of serious drug interactions rose in the first quarter of this year (2008) to a new, record high that included almost 5,000 deaths. The 21,000 reports in the quarter were three times higher than any quarter in 2007.

Even when used properly according to current protocols drugs can have unintended consequences. A few years ago a patient checked into his local hospital with an infection and was promptly given antibiotics. Twelve weeks later he died from the infection. By studying the germs's genetic development while he was in the hospital researchers have discovered there

were 35 distinct evolutionary developments within that short time span which eventually made the germ completely drug resistant.

Antibiotic treatments can also have a negative impact on beneficial bacteria that live in our guts, especially with prolonged or repeated treatments, according to a recent study. We need good gut bacteria for nutrition, metabolism and immune responses. While taking antibiotics researchers discovered that 30% of the bacterial species and strains were significantly affected and it took up to four weeks for most of them to return to pre-treatment levels.

Maybe there are reasons so many doctors are using placebos? A study published recently in BMJ, formerly the British Medical Journal, found that 50% of doctors say they prescribe placebos for their patients and more than two-thirds believe it's permissible to do so. The study was partly funded by our National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the results are similar to surveys of physicians in Israel, Denmark and in Britain.

Congress heard testimony this year that the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) simply does not have the manpower to guarantee the safety of these products. There have been several reports in the news this year of biased studies being submitted to the FDA for drug approval which do not present the whole story on the drug's dangers. In the case of BPA, which the FDA has ruled to be "safe", their own review panel has said the agency ignored federal studies on the chemical and relied too heavily on industry research. While other countries like Canada have already ruled against BPA in products for babies and children Americans are still exposed to this dangerous chemical. Clearly the drug industry has lots of friends in Washington and the FDA.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study this year warning against a new generation of "biological" drugs. Nearly 1/4th of these drugs produced serious side effects that led to safety warnings soon after they went on the market. Originally everyone thought that a drug based on biological, instead of chemically artificial ingredients would be safer. Clearly that idea has been disproven.

Americans don't even know what incentives the pharmaceutical industry is providing to doctors to stimulate more drug sales. Numerous attempts to pass legislation requiring disclosure have been killed by industry lobbyists at both state and federal levels. There have been several cases making headlines recently about incredible payments to doctors to promote drugs. It's reached the point that Eli Lilly and other drug companies are beginning to post the amounts they pay doctors for speeches and consulting because they realize it's becoming a public relations nightmare. With more than two-thirds of professors and authorities at medical schools having direct financial ties to the drug industry the public sees what appears to be a too-close relationship between doctors and drug companies. Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) continues to press for new sunshine laws to shed a little light on this cozy arrangement that puts the health of all Americans at risk.

You're already taking drugs that your doctor never prescribed. That's because hospitals and nursing homes currently are legally dumping more than 250 million pounds of prescription drugs into America's water supply every year. USA Today and other publications have reported that these drugs are making it through the treatment process and into the tap water of millions of

Americans. Again the FDA says the amounts are too small to be dangerous. In contrast to that opinion, homeopathy is a 100-year-old treatment used widely in Europe is based on the concept that even minute amounts of a substance can be biologically active. Again, how many years will it take for someone at the FDA or in Congress to realize the health of our nation is at risk because of prescription drugs?

Meanwhile the health of Americans continues to decline even while our drug use continues to climb. Obesity in our country has caused the rate of diabetes to double in just the last ten years. We have lots of drugs to treat diabetes but none to prevent it. How many of these drugs are causing the obesity that in turn results in diabetes?

Four hundred years ago the author of Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift, wrote that the three best doctors in the world were Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet and Dr. Merryman. Four centuries later we're still discovering that what we eat and drink, the peace we find within ourselves and the joy we find within life are the foundation of our health. (Since they didn't have cars and power tools back then I'd probably add Dr. Exercise today.)

To illustrate the importance of lifestyle to our health, this year Medicare approved the Ornish Program as the first lifestyle therapy to reverse heart disease. The therapy was accepted because it's been medically proven to be more effective than drugs. Yet it's still considered an alternative therapy because most doctors would rather write prescriptions for drugs or give angioplasty, stent or even by-pass surgery than talk about a lifestyle therapy with their patients. To be fair, most patients would rather pop a pill or have surgery than radically change their lifestyle to promote better health.

Instead of popping another dangerous drug maybe it's time for Americans to take responsibility for their own health and look at the choices we make every day. Instead of putting more duct tape on their health problems maybe it's time to repair the source of the problem properly. First of all you should give yourself time to heal naturally or try some chicken soup instead of running to the doctor for antibiotics or steroids every time you have a sniffle. Try looking for a complementary or alternative therapy to treat the source of your health problem instead of simply covering it up with more prescription drugs.

Next time you use duct tape around the house remember that how you make a repair, and how you take care of your health, are choices you make for yourself.

Alan Smith is the author of UnBreak Your Health – The Complete Guide to Complementary & Alternative Therapies (Loving Healing Press 2007).