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Demystifying Dietary Supplements

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“Americans, especially American women, are being lied to and robbed blind; spending billions of dollars each year to eat dried up plants already growing in their own gardens,” Giuffre alleges. She’s referring to the huge market—$22 billion in 2007 alone—for herbal remedies and dietary supplements, nearly all of it unregulated, untested, or both.

Giuffre is a former Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Nurse Research Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, experienced in patient care as well as clinical research. Her concern is that most people are too credulous of the sometimes outrageous claims made about the wide panorama of practices and treatments proliferating under the umbrella of alternative medicine. This book is an attempt to set the record straight.

Giuffre ridicules the popular notion that “natural” medications, unlike drugs prescribed by a doctor, will do no harm. Any substance that acts on the body anatomically or physiologically is a drug, she says, and herbal products may not only be poisonous—think arsenic—but may interact harmfully with prescribed medication. Besides, she points out, your body doesn’t really know whether a particular ingredient “comes from the hills of Bolivia or a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland.”

Another caveat: don’t assume that because someone is wearing a white coat and is called a doctor they were trained at a legitimate medical school. Giuffre found that an image of one woman in medical garb touted as an “expert” on several Web sites was available for download from a clip-art site.

Unregulated drugs, she says, are not required by law to be proven safe or effective. Saying that an herbal cure-all has been “clinically tested,” for example, is unhelpful without knowing the results of those tests and how they were conducted. Additionally, without regulation, nobody is monitoring dosages or even checking whether what the consumer gets is what the packaging says it is.

Giuffre explains clearly how to evaluate claims, check on manufacturer’s credentials, and in general be a bit more informed about what we put into our bodies. Logical, down-to-earth, and humorous, she challenges some dangerous fallacies in the way people think about health and medicine. Consumers need to ask hard questions, she says, about whether a product works, what proof of its efficacy the manufacturer can offer (“testimonials” don’t count), and whether the risks are worth the results (and cost).

Unfortunately, those who might benefit most from the book may be put off by the author’s undisguised scorn for proponents of alternative medicine, who are referred to too often as “these people.”

Giuffre is not an apologist for Big Pharma. Until herbal and dietary supplements are held to the same rigorous standards as pharmaceuticals, her message is an important one for readers’ health—and their budgets.
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