

## Shutting down the hucksters of false hope

**Janice Kennedy**

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A woman my sister knows of -- the mother of a friend -- was suffering from advanced lung cancer. Desperate, she went to Mexico for one of those miracle cures, exhausting her life's savings. She died a few months later.

But you don't have to go all the way to Mexico to be emotionally and financially exploited. There are plenty of operators here at home who are ready, willing and able to do the same.

Ask Ottawa's Patrick McDougall, who has been waging war against such con-men for seven years now -- since his daughter, suffering from breast cancer, put her faith and savings into one such source of false hope after reading the company's credible-sounding boast about survival rates that were dramatically better than those of conventional therapies. After ingesting daily handfuls of its pills, essentially vitamin and mineral supplements, for close to two years, she died at the Ottawa Hospital on a spring day in 2003. She was 46, a brilliant and accomplished woman with a lovely disposition, a husband, a young daughter and a large, grieving circle of family and friends.

McDougall is 79 now, a retired CBC radio and television announcer. But he is as stubborn and articulate as ever, and he refuses to just "let it go." He admits he has become obsessed with people who exploit weaker people; with charlatans who enrich themselves by abusing the hope of the desperate; with trying to stop them.

He's accumulated masses of supportive research and documentation, given countless interviews, confronted hucksters face to face, buttonholed politicians, sent powerful letters to editors, political leaders, bureaucrats, agencies, medical officers, other doctors, the provincial College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Results have been frustrating. The complex issue is linked with so many mutually exclusive levels of authority (the doctors' college, for instance, says it can't do much because the target of McDougall's complaint is not a physician) that precious little has happened over seven intense years.

"I struggle to be professional and not lose my head, because I really want to scream at these people," he says.

But he won't cry uncle. This summer he's been writing passionate and compelling letters to members of Parliament about Bill C-51, the federal government's planned legislation to amend and modernize Canada's Food and Drugs Act. The bill would have banned promoting "a therapeutic product in a manner that is false, misleading or deceptive or is likely to create an erroneous impression" about its benefits or scientific credentials.

But, says McDougall, the bill's suggestion that marketers of alternative therapies should have to submit their products to clinical testing sparked a shrill

protest campaign from some in the industry, who made it seem as if all natural food products would be removed from store shelves.

Most people don't want that to happen, understandably -- and neither does McDougall, who just wants the fraudsters stopped. But, he says, the bill and its proposed strict new guidelines are now threatened, thanks to the well orchestrated public outcry and a possible fall election. He worries that no government will dare raise the contentious issue again -- allowing the sellers of phantom hope to survive, thrive and prosper.

McDougall has one outfit in his sights, but it is not unique. A whole industry has grown up around the lucrative exploitation of fellow humans in distress. Cancer sufferers and their families are obvious targets, but so are those affected by a broad range of other devastations, including severe mental illness. Over the years, there have been some remarkably tantalizing, and remarkably cynical, carrots of unconventional hope dangled in front of people suffering from schizophrenia and debilitating depression.

As McDougall knows from experience -- including his own two bouts with cancer -- that a victim's desperation paves the way. "When you have cancer, you are scared out of your wits. Literally. You can't make rational decisions. It's too overpowering. If someone says to you, 'I can cure your cancer by getting you to drink rainwater,' you say, 'OK, I'll try it.' "

The con men also rely, he believes, on a kind of facilitating culture that creates enormous faith in magic pills. "We're not that far removed from the kind of public that went for Lydia Pinkham's compound," he says, citing the iconic 19th-century tonic that came to define shrewd medical marketing. "These people are 21st-century snake-oil salesmen."

That's why he is so passionate about any long-overdue legislation that could throw roadblocks in the way of those who prey on hope with a cynical opportunism that is criminal. Or that would be criminal, if government properly protected its citizens from such exploitation.

McDougall is aware that many people regard him as just another crank or pest. "I've become like a voice in the wilderness -- but I'm no John the Baptist. And I'll tell you something else. I'm getting tired of my own voice."

Here's the irony, though. McDougall would never describe himself as a champion, but that's exactly what he's become for all of us - at least all of us who don't line our pockets with blood money. Health fraud affects everyone, and, having witnessed it first hand, McDougall actually cares about this.

So we can start listening to the warnings he, and others equally galvanized, have issued. Or we can just keep ignoring the whole messy thing.

At least until the day it lands with a dark thud on our own doorsteps.

Janice Kennedy's column appears here weekly.

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