

Buying Your Health:
Medical Consumerism in the Early Twentieth Century

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After WWI, the United States saw an unprecedented rise in economic production and mass consumerism, an era that came to be characterized by wealth, prosperity, and vanity. Spurred on by the second industrial revolution, large corporations began mass-producing a variety of products, and for the first time in several decades, Americans had the monetary resources and economic freedom to purchase these products, including cars, household appliances, leisure items, etc. Advertisements played a significant role in this consumerism movement, and in the decades following WWI, advertising agencies refined their strategies to encourage individuals and families to purchase their products. Medicine and healthcare were not exempt from this overwhelming influence of consumerism, and during the 1920s and in following decades, Americans' accessibility to medicine and health products dramatically increased—as did their inclination to purchase self-prescribed medicine and products for a physical ailment rather than visit a doctor. This intertwining of medicine and consumerism was largely due to persuasive advertising strategies, including the use of universal language, the promise of self-improvement and disease prevention, and the idea that health products could negate the consequences of poor lifestyle choices.

Today's culture of medical consumers and the practice of “shopping around” for the best healthcare found their beginnings in the early twentieth century,¹ an era known as the “golden age of medicine.”² Prior to this, however, American medical care looked quite different. Fewer doctors were accessible to patients, and those that were accessible

¹ Nancy Tomes, *Remaking the American Patient: How Madison Avenue and Modern Medicine Turned Patients into Consumers* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.

² *Ibid.*

came to the patient's home to administer care.³ Not all doctors attended medical school,⁴ resulting in inconsistent and often unsatisfactory patient care. Additionally, doctors' visits were very expensive,⁵ and since the majority of Americans did not have health insurance,⁶ medical bills took a great financial toll on those receiving medical care. Fortunately, by the early 1900s, healthcare "took a great leap forward"⁷ with the advancement of medical research, the institution of more rigorous medical schools, and the emergence of new technologies in hospitals.⁸ Unfortunately, this new patient care was even more expensive, and an uninsured family might spend 10 to 25 percent of their annual income on medical treatment.⁹ Despite the increasing cost of patient care, its quality remained unsatisfactory on multiple fronts, leading many patients to harbor feelings of frustration and disappointment in physicians and hospitals by the 1920s.¹⁰

At the same time, the United States witnessed great economic growth in the years following WWI, fueled largely by the second industrial revolution and increased

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nancy Tomes, "Merchants of Health: Medicine and Consumer Culture in the United States, 1900-1940," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001), 526.

⁶ Ibid., 527.

⁷ Nancy Tomes, *Remaking the American Patient*, 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

consumer spending.¹¹ During the 1920s, Americans were purchasing goods and spending money like never before. Purchases included both “durables”—costly yet rarely purchased items like cars and kitchen appliances¹²—and “nondurables”—cheap, regularly replaced items like sweets, cigarettes, and toothpaste.¹³ Advertising and marketing played a critical role in the 1920s economy,¹⁴ and almost overnight, advertising became an industry, producing a consumer culture that still exists in the United States today. In conversation, the advertising industry came to be called Madison Avenue after the famous street in New York that was associated with advertising agencies.¹⁵

The widespread consumerism of the 1920s combined with patients’ dissatisfaction with their physicians and healthcare options led to a new type of medical care in the United States. By the 1920s and certainly in the following decades, more and more patients began purchasing self-prescribed medicines and health products,¹⁶ which were significantly more affordable and more accessible¹⁷ than receiving care from a physician. For the first time, patients came to be thought of as consumers, possessing the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

freedom to “shop around”¹⁸ and choose which health products and services they wished to purchase.¹⁹ Author Nancy Tomes, an expert on medicine and consumer culture in the United States, writes, “The habits of mind cultivated in a consumer culture organized to sell toothpaste and refrigerators did indeed spill over . . . into the views of health-related products and services.”²⁰ Advertising played a significant role in this patient-consumer mentality, and advertising agencies used a variety of strategies to encourage consumers to purchase health products.

One of these marketing strategies used by advertising agencies was universal language. As previously mentioned, given the increasing cost of doctors’ bills²¹ and the rise in consumerism, Americans witnessed a shift in the method of patient care and disease treatment: fewer visits to the doctor and more self-prescribed medication and health products. Initially, however, there seemed to be skepticism and a lack of faith in the effectiveness of many of these new health products. In other words, these over-the-counter medications lacked the credibility of a physician. To combat this skepticism and sell their products, advertisers utilized universal language, or the portrayal of universal support for a particular product.²²

For example, a 1924 advertisement for AL-14 Formula For Colds used universal language to market and sell their cold medication. The headline of the advertisement

¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

²⁰ Nancy Tomes, “Merchant of Health,” 525.

²¹ Tomes, *Remaking the American Patient*, 3

²² Tomes, “Merchant of Health,” 538.

read, “Formula AL-14 For Colds: This is the most effective cold remedy *in the world*.”²³ The advertisement went on to read, “*Everywhere* the discovery of AL-14 is being hailed as the greatest advance ever made in fighting colds,”²⁴ and “*Druggists and physicians everywhere* are recommending AL-14 for at last they have a preparation for colds that they know will produce prompt results.”²⁵ The advertiser’s goal was to convey that everyone was using AL-14 to relieve their cold symptoms and that they were seeing results, thereby validating the effectiveness of the cold medicine and encouraging consumers to purchase the product.

Another example of an advertisement that employed universal language was an advertisement for Lifebuoy Health Soap. The advertisement read,

Athletes, housewives, doctors, society women, nurses, business girls, salesmen, lawyers—actually *millions* of men and women in *all* walks of life, depend on a daily bath with Lifebuoy to keep them safe from ‘B.O.’—free from any likelihood of their offending . . . Because of their confidence, Lifebuoy is today America’s leading bath soap.²⁶

The advertisement suggested that all kinds of people—regardless of their gender, age, or occupation—have enjoyed the benefits of Lifebuoy Health Soap. This claim would have

²³ “Formula AL-14 For Colds. This Is the Most Effective Cold Remedy in the World,” American Chemical Company, Formula AL-14 for Colds, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1928), accessed November 20, 2017.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “No Ordinary Soap Stops ‘B.O.’ as Lifebuoy Does!,” Lever Brothers Ltd., Lifebuoy Health Soap, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1938), accessed November 20, 2017.

been enticing to consumers. If the Lifebuoy Health Soap worked for “*millions* of men and women in *all* walks of life,”²⁷ then consumers could be fairly certain that the product would work for them and effectively eliminate unwanted body odor. In this advertisement, universal language not only provided credibility through physician endorsements,²⁸ but it also validated the product’s effectiveness, thus increasing the likelihood that consumers would purchase the product.

Early twentieth century advertising agencies employed another equally effective advertising strategy: promising consumers self-improved health and protection from sickness and disease. In the years following WWI, American consumers placed greater emphasis on “taking care of [themselves]”²⁹ and “positive health,”³⁰ and advertisers catered to these desires. Tomes notes, “Americans . . . were exposed to [advertisements] designed to create a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with their current health status and a longing for a new and improved self. In response to those longings, they purchased a widening array of health care products and services.”³¹ Additionally, advertising agencies began marketing medical and health products as “preventive.” In the period between the 1920s and 1940s, Americans experienced emotions of fear and frustration: they feared contracting a serious disease as well as frustration over doctors’ tendencies to simply

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Tomes, “Merchant of Health,” 538.

²⁹ Tomes, *Remaking the American Patient*, 42.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 531.

treat a disease or ailment rather than prevent it in the first place.³² Advertising agencies appealed to these emotions when marketing health products, using language such as “self-improved health” and “prevention” to communicate to consumers that their products were an effective alternative to physician care.

A 1926 advertisement for Pepsodent toothpaste appealed to consumers’ desires for better oral health and disease prevention. The advertisement depicted a smiling mother as she examined her young child’s teeth, clearly satisfied with the boy’s improved oral hygiene after using Pepsodent toothpaste.³³ The ad opened with a simple question: “Do you [mothers] want your child to have prettier teeth now, and better protection from serious tooth and gum troubles all through later life?”³⁴ The creators of this Pepsodent advertisement clearly knew their audience: middle-class, stay-at-home mothers—the ones who usually did the shopping for the family.³⁵ In an age when good dental care was expensive and access to dentists was lacking,³⁶ Pepsodent offered a simple solution to prevent tooth and gum diseases³⁷ and achieve teeth that were “whiter, cleaner, [and] more sparkling,”³⁸ all for a fraction of what a trip to the dentist would cost. This promise of

³² Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 540.

³³ “Mother, Be Sure You Get Pepsodent for Child’s Teeth and Gums,” Pepsodent Company, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1926), accessed November 20, 2017.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 528.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 538.

³⁷ “Mother, Be Sure You Get Pepsodent for Child’s Teeth and Gums.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

self-improved oral health and disease prevention would have appealed to any mother, thus increasing the chances that she would have purchased Pepsodent for her children.

Following the same trend of “self-improved health” and disease prevention, a 1940 Listerine advertisement featured an image of a concerned woman on a telephone saying, “Joe! . . . in the Hospital? . . . Why, he only had the sniffles when we went dancing Saturday!”³⁹ The advertisement insinuated that Joe did not do anything to treat his common cold, and as a result, he ended up in the hospital with a life-threatening condition. Therefore, the ad concluded, “Don’t take a cold lightly. Don’t neglect it. Take care of it at once.”⁴⁰ The advertisement urged consumers to take the common cold seriously, and to prevent a minor illness from developing into a more serious condition, authorities recommended “[gargling] full strength Listerine every two hours.”⁴¹ Nozol, another brand of cold medication, took a similar approach in their advertising campaigns, asserting that the best way to prevent the common cold from developing into a more serious disease was by purchasing and consuming Nozol.⁴² Since both Listerine and Nozol were advertised as preventive products, their promises of improved health would have eased consumers’ fears about the possibility of contracting a deadly disease and encouraged them to purchase these products as preventive measures.

³⁹ “Joe! . . . In the Hospital? . . . Why, He Only Had the Sniffles When We Went Dancing Saturday,” Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, Listerine, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1940), accessed November 20, 2017.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Take No Chances with a Common Cold,” Nozol, Duke University, (1927), accessed November 20, 2017.

These “preventive” and “self-improved” health products proved to be highly effective, and as a result, a new type of patient-consumer emerged, necessitating new approaches to advertising. The barrage of health-related advertising in the first half of the twentieth century corresponded to the realization that, thanks to “preventive” and “self-improvement” health products, deaths from infectious diseases were on the decline and “ailments associated with greater longevity and prosperity were becoming the leading causes of death.”⁴³ By the year 1921, heart disease emerged as the leading cause of death in the United States, and cancer was not far behind.⁴⁴ The culprits behind such life-threatening diseases, critics claimed, were overconsumption associated with poor lifestyle choices, including “overeating, under exercising, and excessive use of alcohol and tobacco.”⁴⁵ This heightened awareness of the dangers of overconsumption influenced advertising strategies in the early twentieth century as advertisers developed new ways to market and sell their products. One such strategy was emphasizing a product’s ability to minimize the negative health consequences associated with over consumption and poor lifestyle choices.

In a 1925 newspaper advertisement for Dormy Cigarettes, the headline read, “Less Nicotine in These Cigarettes.”⁴⁶ The ad went on to say, “If your physician has prescribed Dormy Cigarettes, or if you are sensibly prescribing for yourself a cigarette of

⁴³ Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 533.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 533.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁴⁶ “Less Nicotine in These Cigarettes,” Dormy Cigarettes, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1925), accessed November 20, 2017.

reduced nicotine content, now is the time to order at Macy's."⁴⁷ In an attempt to counter negative perceptions about smoking and its health consequences—specifically lung cancer⁴⁸—Dormy Cigarettes were advertised as being less detrimental to one's health compared to normal cigarettes that contained greater amounts of nicotine. The advertisement even said that Dormy Cigarettes could be “prescribed”⁴⁹ by a physician, suggesting that physicians approved of this unhealthy habit. This advertisement encouraged Americans to purchase these reduced-nicotine cigarettes by communicating that they could still enjoy smoking their cigarettes—a luxury and favorite pastime of many—without incurring the negative health consequences associated with smoking.⁵⁰

Phillips' Milk of Magnesia utilized a similar strategy in their advertising campaigns. A 1930 newspaper advertisement for Phillips' Milk of Magnesia, titled “When Nature Warns of Too Much Acid,”⁵¹ opened with the following:

Authorities have warned us so often that nowadays almost all people know the dangers of a diet too rich in acid-producing foods . . . meats, sweets, cereals . . . Of course, when pain and sourness about two hours after eating, heartburn, headaches, gas or nausea, warn of too much acid, we can diet our way out of the trouble. But that takes time. And there's no use

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 523.

⁴⁹ “Less Nicotine in These Cigarettes.”

⁵⁰ Tomes, “Merchants of Health,” 18.

⁵¹ “When Nature Warns of Too Much Acid,” Phillips' Milk of Magnesia, *Medicine and Madison Avenue Collection*, Duke University, (1930), accessed November 20, 2017.

of suffering when Nature provides in magnesia a quick, harmless means of relief.

The ad opened by pointing out the consequences of over-eating and over-indulging on rich foods—like “meats, sweets, and cereals”⁵²—that many Americans enjoyed. With Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia, however, Americans could easily relieve the most uncomfortable symptoms that accompany over-consuming these rich foods and in a relatively short amount of time.⁵³ This ad not only encouraged consumers to purchase Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia, but it also assured consumers that they could continue to buy and over-consume their favorite indulgent foods, leading to continued consumption of those food stuffs. This advertisement also employed a previously mentioned advertising strategy, that of universal language. The advertisement stated that, “Doctors the world over are united in favor of just one form of magnesia. For fifty years, they’ve been prescribing Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia.”⁵⁴ This ad suggested that since doctors *everywhere* were prescribing Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia, it was a safe and affordable alternative to a visit to the doctor’s office, thus encouraging consumers to purchase the product. Companies and advertising agencies intentionally marketed their products this way and went to great lengths to assure consumers that they could achieve good health without sacrificing their lifestyles and enjoyments.

This intertwining of medicine and consumerism in the first half of the twentieth century was largely the result of persuasive advertising strategies. Advertisements played

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

a central role in the consumerism movement in the decades following WWI,⁵⁵ and advertising agencies refined their strategies to encourage consumers to purchase self-prescribed health products like never before. The Lifebuoy Health Soap advertisement capitalized on the effectiveness of universal language; Listerine and Nozol advertisements promised self-improved health and disease prevention, and Phillips' Milk of Magnesia profited from ad campaigns claiming that their health products could negate the consequences of poor life-style choices. All of these strategies and many more were used to transform the American patient into a consumer. In her book *Remaking the American Patient*, Nancy Tomes wrote, "Positive health required a medicine cabinet stocked with tooth powder to preserve teeth, a reliable laxative to open the bowels, and an antacid to calm the stomach."⁵⁶ By the 1920s and certainly by the 1930s, good health became a commodity—something to be bought—and this trend is no less true today.

⁵⁵ Nancy Tomes, *Remaking the American Patient*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

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