

Don't Judge a Pill by its Cover

By Reg P. Wydeven
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This summer I learned that one of my best friends had cancer. Thankfully he caught it early and is in great shape. He had successful surgery and treatment, but he has a long road of recovery ahead of him.

We were devastated when we found out, then we were scared of the possibilities, so I couldn't begin to imagine what he and his family were going through. We obviously would have done anything possible to ensure a full recovery for him.

And horrifically, that's exactly what some weight loss and immune system supplement manufacturers are counting on.

The Office of Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently released a report warning consumers that dozens of weight loss and immune system supplements on the market are illegally labeled and lack the recommended type of scientific evidence to support their health claims.

In its review of the \$20 billion supplement industry, investigators purchased 127 weight loss and immune system supplements from online retailers or stores across the country and determined that 20% of them had labels that made illegal claims about curing or treating diseases. Investigators also discovered that the suggested uses of many of the supplements were not backed by recommended scientific studies.

Some of these scientific studies included a 30-year-old handwritten college term paper purporting to substantiate the supplements' claims, advertisements, news releases and even links to Wikipedia entries or online dictionaries.

Sadly, some of the manufacturers' claims are outright prohibited under federal law, such as their supplements can prevent or even cure diseases like cancer or diabetes or they can improve the condition of people with HIV or AIDS. As a result, consumers could be misled to rely on these supplements instead of taking a truly helpful medication prescribed by a physician.

Dietary supplements do not fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration unless they cause consumers to get sick or they are linked to a safety issue. This means that supplements are not required to go through the rigorous tests that other products monitored by the FDA must go through to prove they are safe or effective.

The FDA requires that dietary supplements include a disclaimer on their labels indicating the agency has not reviewed whether the statements on the label are truthful. According to the Investigator General's report, 7% of the weight loss and immune support supplements they surveyed did not have this disclaimer.

As a result of the investigation, the FDA is considering asking Congress to increase the agency's powers in overseeing dietary supplements. One power would be the ability to review the supplement manufacturers' evidence supporting their products' claims, especially those purporting to cure or treat specific diseases.

Every morning I give my kids Flintstones vitamins. But if they get sick, I'm taking them to the doctor, and whatever he says we're going to Yabba-Dabba-Do.