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Penn and Teller Take Cheap Shot at Chiropractic, Alternative Medicine

By Editorial Staff

On Jan. 31, 2003, the Showtime cable network aired the second episode of "Penn and Teller: "Bulls#!t!" The series, created by the comedy/magic team of Penn and Teller, is designed to "expose the truth to an otherwise desperate and gullible public." The subject of this particular episode was alternative medicine, and included a segment that took a direct swipe at the chiropractic profession.

According to Penn Jillette, the goal of the program is "to hunt down as many purveyors of B.S. as possible." He framed the Jan. 31 show by stating, "We're looking for B.S., and in alternative medicine, it's just a question of, 'Where do we start?'" then proceeded to ridicule three facets of alternative medicine: reflexology, magnet therapy and "chiropractic medicine."

Reflexology

The first segment of "B.S." introduces viewers to the world of wheelchair-bound reflexologist Zachary Brinkerhoff, who travels the country in a giant RV delivering treatments to truck drivers, health care workers and other patients. According to the show, reflexologists believe the foot contains pathways to every nerve ending and organ in the body, and that by putting pressure on different points on the foot, some diseases can be cured.

Not so, say Stephen Barrett, MD, (whose name should be familiar to chiropractors as the leader of the Quackwatch Web site) and Robert Park, a University of Maryland physics professor. According to Barrett and Park, the healing effects of reflexology are caused by the power of suggestion, not Dr. Brinkerhoff's methods.

Magnet Therapy

In the second segment, William Philpot, MD, offers insights on magnet therapy, and claims it can treat a variety of conditions, including systemic infections; Lyme disease; multiple sclerosis; carpal tunnel syndrome; glaucoma; retinal disorders; and macular degeneration. He also shows Penn and Teller an array of magnetic devices, including a rectangular magnet that can "anti-stress" the heart, and part of a "super magnetic bed" that contains 280 pounds of magnets. (Dr. Philpot erroneously claims the bed contains 400 pounds of magnets.)

As with reflexology, Barrett and Park berate magnet therapy. "Whatever is ailing you, there is a magnetic cure for it," smirks Park, who adds that there is no research to validate Dr. Philpot's claims. Later in the segment, even Dr. Philpot admits, "At this stage, we can't officially, scientifically, claim that we can cure anything."

Not satisfied with their findings, Penn and Teller demonstrate the power of suggestion - and twist the proverbial knife in magnet therapy's back - by setting up a fake doctor with fake medical equipment at a local mall. The "doctor" interviews a woman with chronic wrist pain, and treats her with a series of ever-larger demagnetized magnets, along with "Magno-Mitts" (a pair of oven mitts covered with fake magnets) and a "Magno-Hat." Even though the magnets have no magnetic properties, the woman claims feeling a "rushing sensation" when a magnet is waved over her arm, and having "more energy" when she wears the Magno-Hat.

Chiropractic

The last segment of the show focuses on "chiropractic medicine." From the start, Penn and Teller take aim at D.D. Palmer, asserting that the theory of chiropractic "hasn't changed since one guy just started it, with no proof, in 1895." They further discredit chiropractic by labeling it nothing more than a back-based version of reflexology: "It's just reflexology, but you substitute 'spine' for 'foot.' It's all the same kind of thinking - treating the human body like a voodoo doll."

Remarkably, Penn and Teller admit that chiropractic can help treat legitimate back and neck problems, and that it can work for people who suffer from musculoskeletal injuries. However, they immediately add that the benefits of a chiropractic adjustment are often no better than a good massage, and that some chiropractors promise much more.

Enter Jeffrey Ptak, DC, *cum laude* graduate of Los Angeles Chiropractic College, who believes chiropractic "is about one thing - the location and correction of vertebral subluxations." Ptak is shown delivering a spinal adjustment to a female patient, with seemingly good results.

The program quickly cuts to "chiropractic physician" Charles E. DuVall Jr., DC. According to Dr. DuVall, chiropractors are simply "playing to what people want to hear."

"Any time you can relieve a problem, you can cause a problem," Dr. DuVall says. He then runs down a litany of disorders - fracture; dislocation; disc herniation; even stroke -he claims can be caused by manipulation.

So why do people continue to see a doctor of chiropractic? "Fabulous salesmanship," answers Dr. DuVall, who compares DCs to evangelists.

And why do chiropractors schedule so many visits for their patients? "So the chiropractor can buy a Porsche," Dr. DuVall scoffs.

The episode concludes with Penn and Teller seated at a table, a flock of ducks in the background. The two rise from the table, and Penn issues a warning to alternative medicine practitioners: "As science moves ahead, most of these 'doctors' will have to get real jobs." As the camera fades, the two stroll around the table, quacking like ducks - their tribute to a health care discipline they consider nothing more than quackery.

* * *

What lessons can be learned from Penn and Teller's pet project? It depends on one's point of view. The chiropractic profession may have its flaws, but of course, so does Western medicine. Where's the "B.S." episode that exposes the number of deaths caused by medical mistakes each year, or the relationship between pharmaceutical advertising and the publishing of favorable drug studies in medical journals? Apparently, viewers won't hear any of that from Penn and Teller. Instead, they'll get a hearty dose of information about such topics as talking to the dead; alien abductions; the end of the world; secondhand smoke; and the baby-product industry.

In the publishing industry, reporters and editors are always reminded to consider the source of the information they receive. The chiropractic profession should heed this advice with regard to Penn and Teller's episode on alternative medicine. Remember, Penn and Teller aren't health care experts - they're magicians. For more than 25 years, these self-proclaimed "scam artists" have made their living from sleight-of-hand and distraction. In other words, they get paid to deceive people, and their one-sided, ill-informed Jan. 31 program may have done just that: deceived millions of Americans from seeking the benefits of chiropractic care.

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