

# New book helps readers spot online health scams

July 29 2021, by Lou Corpuz-Bosshart

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Internet health scams have increased in recent years, often spread through social media and causing untold harm, according to a new book by UBC nursing professor, Dr. Bernie Garrett.

"[The New Alchemists](#)" focuses on some of the many deceptive healthcare and marketing techniques used to mislead people—and offers readers tips to avoid falling prey to scammers.

Dr. Garrett has more than 35 years of experience in nursing and research on [health](#) care practices. In this Q&A, he explains why online health scams are so pervasive, shares recent examples, and gives advice to minimize their impacts.

## **Why is your book called "The New Alchemists?"**

The alchemists are best known for trying to turn metal into gold, but they also sought to develop an immortality potion. These ancient philosophers acquired a reputation for being charlatans and crooks, and so the title fits very well with what we're seeing today where people are marketing various fake remedies.

## **Why is it important to understand and detect health scams?**

Deliberately selling a product using false marketing or spreading false information can have serious health consequences. Probably the worst examples are the fake cancer clinics that sell remedies or treatments for cancer patients who are desperately searching for solutions.

We've also seen hugely deceptive practices in the pharmaceutical industry, such as lawsuits over the mis-marketing of drugs such as OxyContin or Abilify.

Stranger examples include the 18-year-old fake doctor in Florida who operated for a number of years, as well as bizarre fake health machines, and alternative practitioners who market useless therapies using false

claims.

## **Why are people seemingly deceived so easily?**

Scam marketers are well-versed in modern [advertising](#) techniques and the psychology of persuasion. They know all the triggers that can help sell a product. Examples include making it appear that a treatment is scarce, with language like "supplies are running out" or "buy it quickly now before it's gone." They often link their product to positive images, such as photos of mothers, or claim that a product is "healthy" or "natural."

There are certainly conditions that the medical field does not have good treatments for and so people seek alternatives. Unfortunately, this can also make them easier prey for deceptive practitioners.

## **Have these deceptive practices proliferated during COVID-19?**

They definitely have proliferated, and this has been aided by [social media](#). You've only got to look at the success of the anti-vaccination campaign, where we see people being falsely advised that they will become magnetic or infertile or claiming vaccines have not been tested. Unfortunately, people can post misinformation on social media with no real consequences.

## **How can people protect themselves from internet health scams?**

As we outline in the book and in previous research, look for trigger words, such as if the marketer suggests that something is only available for a short time or from this one site. Watch for claims that mention

"science hasn't caught up with this" or "amazing results." Be very wary of claims that are based on personal testimonies or celebrity endorsement.

Check the source of information. Use established, reliable sources such as Health Canada, the World Health Organization or even the FDA in the United States. These type of sources are certainly more trustworthy than a blog post from relatives or friends or people you've never heard of on social media.

It's also important for all of us to lobby for better health regulation and advertising standards of practice.

We do need to take an interest in our health and in what we are being told. Deception is more widespread than people think, but you can take some simple steps to avoid getting caught up in it.

Overall, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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