

A person's face is partially visible at the bottom, wearing a crinkled aluminum foil hat. A bright yellow banner with a black border is positioned across the upper part of the image, containing the word 'FAKE' in a large, black, serif font.

FAKE

MEDICINE

Exposing the wellness crazes, cons
and quacks costing us our health

CHAPTER 1

A PAIN IN THE BUM

Navigating a health crisis can be a confusing and awful experience. I understand the lure of alternatives to modern medicine and have even fallen for them myself.

In fact, my journey to become a general practitioner was influenced by the confusion and misinformation I encountered as a teenage patient.

Like many fifteen-year-olds I was a pimply mess of embarrassment, hormones and deep-seated anxieties as I sat next to my mum at the local clinic. We were seeing our family doctor and were about to receive some bad advice.

I told my GP what the problem was, while the faint scent of hospital-grade antiseptic wafted up my nostrils. He paused and gazed out the window, then turned to face me, peered over his glasses and asked, ‘What shall we do with you?’

He was the doctor and I was the patient, so I sincerely hoped this was a rhetorical question.

Pain was a familiar experience for me by that stage. Not the pain of teenage angst – although there was a fair bit of

that too – but a physical pain in my back that my family had assumed would disappear as I got older. It hadn't.

A few years earlier, I was mucking around at school when one of my ballet friends lightly performed a *grand jeté* into my lower back. The kick wasn't that hard, but I wound up on the floor writhing in agony. Pain rippled through my body like an earthquake rolling across the landscape. I'd never experienced pain so severe in my life. It engulfed every cell of my body and reached a crescendo where my consciousness protectively departed.

My brain came back into the room when the feeling subsided and I found myself on the ground with tears in my eyes, surrounded by my friends' concerned expressions.

The pain disappeared just as quickly as it had arrived, and I didn't think much of it – but several months later it came back with a vengeance.

I'd experience the odd, sharp twinge during the daytime, but night-time was worse. Falling asleep was all right, but I'd inevitably roll onto my back and wake up in a hot, sweaty mess. My lower back ached like my buttocks had been attacked by a sizzling cattle prod.

Our family doctor looked at me quizzically and eventually deduced, 'Lower back pain is pretty normal. Eighty per cent of the population get it at some stage, in fact I've got exactly the same thing right now. Our physiotherapist will fix you up in a jiffy.'

I wasn't quite sure that back pain in a fifteen-year-old would have the same cause as back pain experienced by a 55-year-old GP, but he was the expert.

A kind-hearted physiotherapist performed an assessment. She taught me some exercises to improve my posture and attempted to massage my lower back, but it was extremely uncomfortable.

I trusted my doctor and believed him when he told me this treatment would help me get better, so I never complained about the pain. I'd grip the edge of the massage table until my knuckles turned white and every muscle in my body was contorted in agony.

When I didn't respond to treatment, my physiotherapist sent me back to see my GP. His working diagnosis was that I likely had a disc prolapse in my lumbar spine, causing sciatic pain to radiate into my buttocks, but a CT scan showed that everything was normal.

He sent me back to the physiotherapist who was happy to continue therapy, satisfied that my anatomy wasn't hiding anything sinister.

Her usual treatments clearly weren't working and my back had become too painful to touch, so she changed tack and commenced heat therapy instead.

She pulled out a handmade device that looked rather primitive – a piece of timber wrapped in carpet with electrical wires hanging out. She positioned the device over my buttocks as I lay prone on the couch.

I watched as she plugged it in, switched it on and left the room. After twenty minutes, she returned to the delightfully warm aroma of burnt carpet and found me grimacing with intense discomfort.

I attended these heat therapy sessions every week and as the temperature intensified over my bare buttocks, I learnt to endure my escalating anguish.

Once again I was sent back to my GP because I wasn't improving and a second CT scan showed nothing had changed. No cause for the pain was identified and no lumbar disc prolapses were seen.

At this point, instead of persevering with the physiotherapist, he decided to send me to an osteopath for another opinion.

After school, I rode my bike to the osteopathy clinic and sat in the waiting room surrounded by anatomical charts of intimidating human skeletons.

The osteopath beckoned me into his treatment room and asked me what was wrong. I pointed to the spot where I was experiencing pain and he asked me to take off everything but my underwear and lie facedown on the treatment table.

After prodding and poking my spine he finally concluded that my vertebrae must be out of alignment. He sounded confident as he produced a shiny device called an 'activator adjusting instrument' and proceeded to adjust me.

I'd never seen an 'activator' before, but quickly discovered they are commonly used by osteopaths and chiropractors to adjust their patients' joints. They are slightly larger than a pen and are designed to release a low-level force into the underlying joint when the trigger mechanism is released.

The osteopath manoeuvred his way around the base of my spine, clicking and thudding into all the typical places he was used to adjusting, but nothing was happening. Since I wasn't responding, he palpated my sacrum (the posterior part of my

pelvis) and found the area of maximal discomfort. He dialled up the force of his ‘activator adjusting instrument’, aimed at the centre of the target on my back and pressed the trigger.

I’d already endured a lot of physical treatments without flinching or making a sound, but this time I wailed like I’d been hit by an axe. He had definitely found the painful spot and was so pleased that he hit me again, and again, and again, in the same area.

I writhed in agony but didn’t complain because I trusted my practitioner.

He asked his receptionist to book me in for regular appointments and I obediently returned each week for my ‘activation’. The pain felt worse after every session, but I accepted the punishment and kept going back for six months because I knew this was going to make me better eventually.

I was simultaneously trying to study for my final year of high school but the discomfort was getting worse. Every night I’d turn over in my sleep and be brutally woken by the sharp pain.

One day I arrived at the osteopathy clinic and sat down next to the skeletons that had become very familiar over time. But my usual osteopath wasn’t there, and a locum welcomed me into the chamber of horrors. I disrobed and lay facedown on the treatment table. He asked me what was wrong, gently pressed on my sacrum and my pain level hit the ceiling once more. He didn’t provide therapy that day but instead wrote a letter to my doctor suggesting a bone scan.

I soon found myself sitting at the hospital radiology unit, watching a syringe of radioactive dye getting pumped into my veins. These radioactive isotopes flowed around my body and

were tailored to attach to any areas of abnormal bone growth. The radiologist took a look at my sacrum and the area causing pain lit up like a Christmas tree.

The area in question is a static piece of bone, shaped like a triangle at the back of your pelvis. It's unusual to get pain in the middle of your sacrum because there aren't any moving parts to cause problems.

The GP told me he now had a new diagnosis – this looked like a bone tumour, possibly cancer.

Even though I'd been pointing to my sacrum the whole time, he'd requested a CT scan of the wrong anatomical area – twice.

My next appointment was with a paediatric orthopaedic specialist and I found myself in yet another waiting room, this time surrounded by other teenagers with their limbs in plaster.

An MRI revealed the villain of this story – a lump in exactly the same spot I'd been pointing to for the past few years. It had been slowly growing, was now the size of a walnut, and was the likely cause of my ongoing discomfort.

The physiotherapist's heat treatment had been painful because it encouraged blood flow into the tumour, which caused swelling and increased pressure on the surrounding area.

The osteopath's 'activator' had also caused extreme pain because it tapped directly onto the bony growth.

No amount of heat therapy or hitting me with a stick was going to help. I needed surgery.

Thankfully my parents believed in modern medicine and booked me in for the operation, but they also believed a higher

power had the potential to heal me. While we waited for my day in theatre, they encouraged me to try God out first.

I come from a Protestant family and we'd been part of Baptist or Presbyterian communities for years. I'd attended church every Sunday for as long as I could remember, and praying every night was just part of my routine. I was told I needed to pray even harder and more frequently if I wanted God to take this tumour away.

I doubled my prayer efforts. Anything to avoid surgery.

Whenever I had a few spare minutes, I'd pray for God to remove the bony lump in my sacrum. I was praying as I biked to school in the morning, and I'd pray myself to sleep in the evening.

I'd been taught that if I loved God and had enough faith, then I'd be able to move mountains, and he would be able to remove tumours.

One day, after an unusually long prayer session, I was absolutely convinced I'd prayed hard enough. It was then that a tingly feeling flowed from the crown of my head, through my body and all the way down to my lower back. A deep sense inside told me that God had healed me during this prayer time.

However, I was suddenly faced with a religious dilemma. How would I know if I was healed or not?

I'd read the Bible story of 'doubting Thomas', one of Jesus's disciples. After Jesus had been nailed to a crucifix and died, Thomas was the one who said he'd only believe Jesus had come back to life if he was able to see and feel the wounds himself. Jesus then turned up next to Thomas with a disappointed look on his face. Thomas was embarrassed that he had ever

doubted. I didn't want to disappoint Jesus and I certainly didn't want to be written up as 'doubting Brad' in a future gospel story.

I knew my faith was strong enough for the tumour to go away, so I didn't need proof that a miracle had occurred. But I needed to know it was gone so I could cancel my surgery. Science collided with religion and I was caught in a Schrödinger's cat quandary.

I needed to touch my back to see if I still had pain. But I was worried that if God had removed the tumour and I started doubting him, maybe he'd sneak it back in again.

The moments between praying and checking were stressful. I quietly slid my hand down my sacral surface to the epicentre of my Schrödinger's tumour. My fingers were poised over the lump that both was and wasn't there. I pressed in and suddenly doubled over in agony and disappointment. What was wrong with me? What was I doing wrong?

My own prayer wasn't working, but my parents told me that God worked in mysterious ways. My mother had spoken with our Catholic neighbour across the road and she suggested we attend a special healing service at her local church. When it comes to getting better from a bone tumour, putting aside centuries of conflict between Catholics and Protestants was surely allowed?

Incense filled my nose as we turned up at the Catholic church. The service commenced and I was encouraged to line up at the front. The priest came out dressed in frilly white robes and proceeded to pray loudly and lay his healing hands on injured body parts. He touched people's heads if they

suffered from headaches and held hands if they had arthritis in their fingers.

He approached me and asked what was wrong. I remember thinking that if he was so close to God, he should have already been told what my problem was, but I went along with this spiritual process and told him my tumour was in the middle of my bum. For some reason, he didn't place his healing hands on my buttocks, but touched my forehead instead.

I reminded him that I didn't have a headache, but he still didn't touch below my waist.

I stood at the front of the church with my eyes closed and hands reaching up to heaven. I prayed with the priest for God to remove the tumour from the base of my spine. Tingles flew up and down my body and I knew that God must have worked some magic. The priest blessed me and moved on to pray for the next person in the queue while I walked back to take my seat. I sat down on the hard wooden pew beside my mother and nearly threw up from the pain.

The priest's healing hands on my forehead and a theatrical church service might have given me tingles while I was standing in front of everyone, but away from the incense, the crowds, my mum and our well-meaning neighbour, I felt empty and betrayed.

Maybe if I had prayed even harder? Maybe if the priest had touched my bum? Maybe if I'd eaten more leafy green vegetables?

A few days later, I was admitted to hospital for surgery.

The orthopaedic surgeon made an incision over my sacrum, delicately removed the bone tumour from my nerves and sent it off for testing.

The surgeon was happy with my progress and after six days he discharged me. The final pathology result came back with a diagnosis of an osteoblastoma – a very rare, but thankfully benign bone tumour.

My family was thrilled I didn't have cancer. They started praising God for getting me through the operation, but I found their attitude perplexing because God hadn't done anything.

What made me better was the dedication, hard work and nimble hands of my paediatric orthopaedic specialist.

These events were traumatising as a teenager because I had no idea what to expect. Before the operation, I didn't know if I would become a paraplegic, expire on the operating table, or if they would find cancer and I'd succumb to a prolonged, painful and gruesome death.

I was fortunate – my surgeon was skilled. I had no awful side effects from the operation, and many years later I have nothing but a scar to show and a story to share from the experience.

It was a lot for me to get my head around, made all the more stressful because by this time I was trying to finish my final-year high school exams.

I had placed trust in my doctor but was unfortunately misdiagnosed. I had trusted my physiotherapist and osteopath, but they had unknowingly tortured me for months without benefit. I had put my faith in God, but my faith was misplaced.

It taught me a valuable lesson. My experience as a patient helped me understand the embarrassment, vulnerability and anxiety people can feel when they engage with doctors and try to navigate a confusing healthcare system.

I also saw just how easy it was – when faced with an overwhelming diagnosis, a painful treatment or confusing medical advice – to be lured towards alternative therapies that might sound more promising, more optimistic and less painful.

As my final year of school came to a close, I applied to study medicine.