

# Pick a bogus treatment...

Mark Honeychurch

At the Society for Science Based Healthcare, we spend a lot of time looking at dodgy therapeutic claims. Most of these claims are made by practitioners of alternative therapies. A few months ago Mark Hanna, a colleague of mine at SBH, messaged me with a curious thought:

“Pick a bogus treatment. Now pick a condition. Someone in New Zealand probably advocates for that.”

This was an interesting idea—that there is so much misinformation about healthcare these days, there’s a high likelihood that someone in New Zealand is claiming their chosen “alternative” therapy can treat pretty much any condition you can think of.

An easy starting place to look for people making claims is online, and there’s a nice feature in Google’s search facility where you can restrict the search to certain domain names. Mark had already tested out a combination of treatment and condition before challenging me—*chiropractic* and *psoriasis*. For this pairing, the Google search to use would be:

chiropractic psoriasis site:nz

The “site:nz” part of the search restricts the search to only websites whose domain names end in .nz—it’s an easy way to restrict the search to sites that are likely to be New Zealand based.

With the above search terms, Mark had found an Auckland chiropractor who has a lengthy testimonial on their website describing the use of chiropractic for treating psoriasis.

It was my turn. I picked *homeopathy* and *bursitis*. Surely nobody’s claiming that sugar pills can treat joint issues? After less than a minute of searching, I found a homeopath in Northland who claims that for bursitis and other joint pain, homeopathy can “treat the whole person” and “fit your specific set of symptoms”, whereas conventional medicines “can have undesirable side effects, and can also suppress symptoms to the extent that healing is hindered”. Damn!

Mark Hanna’s next duo was *acupuncture* and *pneumonia*. He found a Christchurch acupuncturist who is claiming to be able to treat “common cold and flu, bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma, sinusitis, hay-fever”.

At this point I declared the challenge to be “outright depressing”, so I tried to cheer myself up with a more humorous pairing—*aromatherapy* and *flatulence*. It turns out that (at least according to an online naturopathic health store) Oil of Orange Blossom can treat “indigestion, diarrhoea, flatulence and stomach cramps”.

Mark Hanna upped the ante with *Rolfing* and *headaches*—for those not in the know, Rolfing is “soft tissue manipulation and movement education”. It turns out there’s a Rolfing practitioner in Whangarei who can treat “arthritis, colds, depression, fatigue, headaches, [and] insomnia”.

My response to Mark’s Rolfing was to go for some New Age energy weirdness—*orgone* and *cramps*. Orgone energy is usually accessed using a colourful resin pyramid with a copper coil embedded in it, although back in the 50’s you were expected to sit in a small layered wood and metal box. This one was more difficult to find, but within a couple of minutes I’d uncovered a New Zealand based online shop that sells orgone devices, and has a testimonial where menstrual cramps had apparently been alleviated by an “orgone zapper”.

Mark Hanna announced he was going “weirder” with *Reiki* and *ulcers*, but this was disappointingly easy to find—there is an online national health practitioner directory in New Zealand where it is claimed that Reiki may be able to help with, among many other serious conditions, “ulcers, immune system disorders, heart problems, paralysis and depression”. Remember as you read that list that Reiki is a channeling of the “universal life force” through the palms of the practitioner into the patient. Often Reiki practitioners don’t even touch their patients, but merely move

their hands a few inches over them as the patient lies on a massage table.

Our challenge finally came to a halt when I chose *Romi Romi massage* and *bunions*. Romi Romi is “traditional Māori massage”, and it’s a fairly niche therapy. Hah! I’d found a dud. The unlikeliness of massage helping with bunions, paired with a paucity of websites offering Romi Romi, meant that I’d found a combination that does not appear to be advocated for in New Zealand—at least online.

This fun exchange reminded me of a more serious point I think is very important to keep in mind when considering alternative

therapies. Unlike conventional therapies, which have a limited scope, there is a tendency for the practitioners of alternative therapies to advertise their services as something of a panacea. No matter the therapy, there will be people claiming it can treat all conditions—up to and including cancer. Many of these claims are repeated by official industry bodies, despite a lack of evidence. These kinds of claims are likely breaching the Medicines Act, but they have become so prevalent in the last few years that enforcement of our current regulation in New Zealand is failing to keep up with this tidal wave of misleading medical advertising.

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**Competing interests:**

Nil.

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