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Coral Calcium: A Barefoot Scam

Robert Barefoot's theories about the powers of coral calcium don't hold up

By LEON JAROFF

It may be one of the more successful scams of our age. Through books, lectures, audiotapes and infomercials, Robert R. Barefoot has spread his theory that a product he calls coral calcium provides "the scientific secret of health and youth," as well as preventing cancer and a host of other diseases.

Barefoot's infomercials blanket the airways and in December, according to REVshare, a marketing research outfit, resulted in 337,996 web searches. That placed it second in generating web searches among all infomercials in all categories, no small accomplishment. Indeed "coral calcium" is now a well-established part of the lexicon. A Google search lists more than 80,000 entries for coral calcium and some 30,000 for "Robert Barefoot" alone. The best-selling of his three books, "The Calcium Factor," has been ranked in the top 500 Amazon's sales listings.

Dr. Stephen Barrett, whose Quackwatch website is dedicated to exposing medical quackery and who [has investigated Barefoot's activities](#), reports that his advertising has generated over 300 inquiries to his site, more than for any other product.

And what is coral calcium? Barefoot says that it's limestone from dead parts of Okinawa's coral reefs, actually calcium carbonate containing some trace minerals and practically the same as the pure calcium carbonate that is legitimately sold in drug stores as a supplement to prevent osteoporosis.

But there is one major difference: the monthly cost of the recommended dose of Barefoot's calcium tablets is some 15 times greater than that of the ordinary drug store variety. For its headline in a story about Barefoot's wares, the UC Berkeley Wellness Letter wrote, "How to sell a 5 cent supplement for \$1."

According to Barefoot, Okinawans long ago discovered that by ingesting coral sand they could assure good health. In fact, he explains, Okinawans "never, ever, ever get sick. They never get cancer, they never get heart disease, they never get diabetes. They have no doctors. These people live 30, 40 years longer, and they don't grow old." That certainly must come as news to Okinawans.

Here's a typical Barefoot pitch, from his current infomercials: "Over 200

degenerative diseases are caused by calcium deficiency. That includes cancer, heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimers', you name it. These diseases are caused by acidosis — acidification of the body — lack of minerals, especially calcium. When you start taking coral calcium, your body alkalizes and drives out the acid." Sheer nonsense, and it comes from someone who is not a medical doctor, but the recipient of a three-year diploma in chemical research technology from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology.

Or how about this, also from his infomercials: "People should not be concerned about their cholesterol levels because abnormal levels are not the cause of heart disease. The real problem is calcium deficiency." Can you believe it? Apparently many of Barefoot's viewers do.

Summarizing his pitch, Barefoot gives a head-snapping prescription for his viewers' good health and long life: "Take coral calcium and get a minimum of two hours of sunshine on their face every day, without sunscreen." That's a prescription not for good health but for skin cancer.

Hucksters are often known for the company they keep, and Barefoot is no exception. His co-author of "The Calcium Factor," a Canadian MD, had his license cancelled in 1983 for "potentially dangerous" practices. And the host and interlocutor of "A Closer Look," Barefoot's current infomercial, served a prison sentence for credit card fraud and in 1998 signed a consent agreement with the Federal Trade Commission to pay \$500,000 in consumer redress for false advertising of six products marketed with infomercials.

When are the chickens ever going to come home to roost? Barefoot has been getting away with this scam for years, conning his naive audience, and presumably enriching himself along the way. Isn't it well past time for the Federal Trade Commission to step in?

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