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### PREYING ON THE DESPERATE

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## Preying on the Desperate

Go into any drug store and, to ensure a cut does not get infected, you can buy hydrogen peroxide, no prescription needed.

But alternative health promoters are falsely claiming the chemical is an elixir that can cure more than cuts—they encourage people to drink it, with the unfounded belief that it will fight cancer, temper stomach ailments and relieve arthritis.

What they don't say is that ingesting the chemical has been documented to cause injuries, hospitalizations and even deaths, and their claims run counter to medical studies and public health warnings.

In 2011, a 53-year-old woman hoped, she said, to “cleanse her system.” She [drank](#) 10 drops of industrial-strength hydrogen peroxide. That landed her in the emergency room at Detroit's Sinai-Grace Hospital, suffering from severe nausea, vomiting, stomach pain and a blocked blood vessel in her abdomen.

A year later, a 56-year-old man wanted to treat his hive-like skin condition. He [drank](#) concentrated hydrogen peroxide. He ended up in the same emergency room, suffering from symptoms like the bends, more commonly known for felling scuba divers. A scan revealed blocked blood vessels in his brain, caused by hydrogen peroxide.

In both cases, the chemical could have proven fatal.

Dr. Brendan Byrne, now assistant professor of emergency medicine at the University of Michigan Health System, worked with a team of doctors to save both patients. He later wrote about his experiences for a medical journal, [warning](#) fellow doctors, “The ingestion of hydrogen peroxide, even in relatively small volumes, can cause devastating complications.”

These are not the only cases where someone has been hospitalized or died. Yet despite serious health risks and public warnings by federal regulators, alternative health companies continue to market the chemical, claiming elixir-like powers.

You can still walk into certain health food stores and buy a more concentrated version. The bottles are sold with [pamphlets](#) stating hydrogen peroxide is not for drinking. The same brochures give suggested dosages. Online, there are companies—including one that has been formally warned by the US Food and Drug Administration—that continue to sell hydrogen peroxide to the desperate.

The FDA—which has to approve new drugs, fight outbreaks of foodborne illnesses like E. coli, help fight the Zika virus among many other tasks—said it does not have staffing to do much more than warn the public not to drink the chemical. That is the regulator's approach with other homeopathic products known to cause ill effects.

Not only does the FDA warn against consuming it, state poison control centers have also cautioned against drinking concentrated hydrogen peroxide. The [Illinois Poison Control Center](#) advises: “We consider this product so dangerous that ALL calls ... are immediately referred to the nearest emergency room for treatment.”

In medical journals, there is mounting evidence of ill effects, including injuries and deaths.

“If any of my friends decided to tell me they were doing this, I’d tell them that it’s my belief that the risks far outweigh the benefit,” said Dr. Byrne. Like others in the medical community, he warns that even one sip can cause severe health consequences.

## **THE CHEMICAL AND THE CLAIM**

Hydrogen peroxide is typically sold at pharmacies in brown plastic containers and pours out clear as water. In fact, the kind sold in drug stores is mostly water. Only 3 percent of the liquid is hydrogen peroxide.

The label on the container is clear and carefully worded. It’s for cleaning small cuts. For mouth sores, it can be a mouthwash that you spit out. Those uses are acceptable, according to the FDA and medical journals. To be sure, there are common but unrecommended uses, perhaps most commonly as a do-it-yourself way to tint hair blonde.

Then there is the stronger stuff. For industrial uses, you can buy more concentrated hydrogen peroxide, more than 10 times as strong as the version sold in drug stores. This 35 percent solution is labeled as “food grade,” meaning it’s for sanitizing equipment in kitchens.

It is this stronger concentration that some alternative health purveyors hawk as an elixir. Health food advocates see the drug store variety as too tepid.

In Manhattan, like many places across America, you can find it in health food stores.

It’s for sale online. A quick internet search returns listings from Celeste, Trinity NutraLab, Guardian of Eden, Jutrian RX, Pure Health Discounts and even Amazon.

Concentrated hydrogen peroxide doesn’t contain the familiar drug facts label found on drug store products. In one store, the chemical was in a refrigerated case alongside ready-to-eat salads and other edible products.

Labels on high strength hydrogen peroxide ordered online refer customers to a web address for uses.

The label on concentrated hydrogen peroxide sold in some New York City health food stores says you can “stimulate and invigorate your body inside and out with Oxy-tech.” But the label gives no dosing directions and cautions against ingestion. Dosing instructions are in a thin [brochure](#) sent by the supplier, usually sitting near the product display.

## TRAGIC RESULTS

What these brochures fail to mention are the people who drank the chemical and have been injured, hospitalized or killed.

In the early 1990's, an 84-year-old Arizona man was told by a friend that concentrated hydrogen peroxide would help his arthritis. Immediately after [ingestion](#), he suffered a stroke and was left permanently disabled .

Those who sell the chemical recommend storing it in the refrigerator.

A few years later, a four-year-old accidentally drank concentrated hydrogen peroxide. His father used the chemical as an alternate cure for digestive problems. Within minutes, the boy cried out with excruciating stomach pain and soon lost consciousness. Several years later, he was still plagued with seizures and unable to eat or walk on his own.

In 2012, a 74-year-old man drank what he thought was water, straight from an unlabeled pitcher in his daughter's refrigerator. It was concentrated hydrogen peroxide. He was hospitalized, [foaming](#) at the mouth. He was put on an intravenous proton pump inhibitor, a machine typically used for people with severe stomach ulcers and stomach acid. Tests showed he suffered damage along his throat and stomach. He was hospitalized for two days. He was lucky. He survived.

In 2014, a 2-year-old girl was thirsty and [accidentally](#) drank concentrated hydrogen peroxide. She started foaming at the mouth. She seized with abdominal pains. She was rushed to a hospital emergency room, disoriented and going into cardiac arrest. Hospital workers tried to resuscitate her. It did not work. She died.

Along with false medical claims, health food sellers claim concentrated hydrogen peroxide can be a household disinfectant. To be sure, the 35 percent solution is sold for commercial restaurants to sanitize their equipment. But it is not recommended for households.

That, too, has led to documented injury.

In 2012, a Chicago family used the concentrated chemical to clean toothbrushes. It was in a bottle with no labels. Tap water is good enough to clean toothbrushes, according to the US Centers for Disease Control. The family's 12-year-old boy thought the drinking glass contained just water. He took a drink. Soon he was [vomiting](#) blood.

Within an hour he was in a hospital emergency room. After consulting local poison control workers, the hospital took further steps, and found the chemical concentrated around his liver, and he suffered stomach ulcers. He was put in a hyperbaric chamber, typically used for scuba divers suffering from the bends.

“Hydrogen peroxide at any concentration, if drank, reacts with a natural enzyme in the body, catalase, and produces very high volumes of oxygen,” Byrne said during a recent phone interview.

“That oxygen has to go somewhere and the volume is so high that you physically can’t just burp it out,” he said. “It crosses the membrane of the GI [digestive] tract into the blood vessels and those resultant bubbles block up the blood vessels, leading to heart attacks, strokes and other complications.”

Byrne’s team treated both of the Detroit patients with a hyperbaric oxygen chamber.

“The cases I wrote about are not as isolated as they would seem,” said Bryne. “The question is, do people recognize them?” he added. He believes there are more cases, but physicians don’t know to look or check for hydrogen peroxide.

## **PRAYING FOR RELIEF**

To understand why someone might drink the substance, consider Susan Stansbury Khan.

She thought she’d beaten uterine cancer with surgery and radiation. But in October 2015—five years after her cancer was first discovered—she went to Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, DC. It was around the time of her 61st birthday. She got devastating news. Her cancer was back.

She started chemotherapy. Her husband recalled, “It was awful for her.” Daryl Khan had been her high school sweetheart, and they married more than four decades ago.

Desperate for a cure and no fan of mainstream medicine, the husband turned to concentrated hydrogen peroxide. “There were lots and lots of testimonials for the fact that it worked on certain cancers,” said Khan. The testimonials were postings he read on the internet.

He started putting concentrated hydrogen peroxide in her water.

“She would take it and get a kind of acid-reflux initially, so you get like a throw up reaction,” said Khan.

The couple’s eldest son, named Daryl after his father and now a college professor living in New York, found out about the hydrogen peroxide. He was alarmed.

“She didn’t like the way it tasted and she was particularly sensitive already from the chemo—nothing tasted good,” said the younger Khan. He worried hydrogen peroxide would interfere with chemotherapy, a concern he said was shared by his mother’s doctor, who opposed her ingesting the chemical.

The son started undermining his father’s efforts. The chemical “was in a big jug-handled bottle, the kind of thing you’d imagine bouncing around in your trunk the way antifreeze or windshield washer fluid would,” he said. “I dumped it out—I’m not gonna say it wasn’t without some glee to do it, to dump out poison that these total snake oil salesmen are selling.”

But the elder Khan said nothing was working. He didn't know what else to do. "I was groping and struggling and searching, you know," he said, choking back tears.

Susan died less than a year after learning her cancer had returned.

## **SHOPPING FOR A CURE**

In spite of the dangers, concentrated hydrogen peroxide is easy to buy online and in stores.

At The Health Nuts, a chain of New York City-area health food stores, the concentrated chemical can be found in at least several locations, displayed in a refrigerated case, along with a brochure from the manufacturer.

Sudhangshu Roy, a manager at the Upper East Side location for more than 20 years, said customers buy "quite a lot."

Roy declined to speculate why customers buy the product. "We are only the retailer—we recommend customers consult their doctors or health professionals before using any health products," said Roy.

The brochure [warns](#) against taking the chemical. At the same time, it includes a chart listing how many drops to dilute in water and ingest.

Across town, Ellington Campbell has worked at the Health Nut's Upper West Side location for nearly 30 years.

"You can wash your clothes with this product, you can soak your toothbrush in a small amount to kill bacteria, you can clean surfaces, and you can also drink it," said Campbell. He said customers use the product for "detoxing the system," for "a healthy immune system" and to "help with friendly bacteria."

But he added a warning.

"If you drink it like this you will melt all your organs, so you follow these directions, the dosage, you read that," he said, pointing to the brochure.

Campbell and Roy separately said the manufacturer should be contacted for further questions.

## **MONEY TO BE MADE**

ME2Eagle Enterprises, LLC distributes the concentrated hydrogen peroxide sold at The Health Nuts. Owned by Shirley Aven, 77, the company, is based in Whitney, Texas, and markets the chemical under the name Oxy-tech.

During a recent phone interview, Aven's daughter, Chris Wood, 52, said her mother and step-father opened the business about 20 years ago.

“They were always in the chemical business,” said Wood, who works as an office manager for the company. She said after governmental agencies enacted stiffer regulations on the chemical industry, her family struggled financially. It was during that time she said, that her mother learned about hydrogen peroxide. According to Wood, her mother soon realized there was money to be made.

“Mom said it was an answer to a prayer because [financially] they were pretty much on their last leg and she started doing research on this and found out more about it,” said Wood, who couldn’t say exactly how much they sell per year, but confirmed the company distributes the chemical to customers in several states, including the Health Nuts stores in New York.

Wood said customers use the product for many things, such as washing laundry, marinades and in hydroponic gardening. She claimed poultry that ingested the product could be considered “organic”.

For maladies, Wood said the chemical, when diluted, can be used in enemas, douches and baths.

She said most customers are elderly, and talked at length about those who she said have used the product for cancer, boils, West Nile Virus and parasites. For each malady, Wood, who is not licensed to practice medicine or dispense medication, described seemingly miraculous results.

Wood believes many doctors are opposed to hydrogen peroxide because they are “sleeping with the pharmaceutical companies.”

“Well, if, let’s see, if everybody was on peroxide and being healthy and didn’t go to the doctor, well then what?” she said. “I mean, think of the stock market and I mean the pills and the medicines and how much they can charge for this, and hospitals, there’s a whole system there.”

When asked if she knew the FDA’s position on hydrogen peroxide, Wood, said “That I don’t know.”

She said ME2Eagle Enterprises has two employees and has never dealt with the FDA. She said, “It’s still a mom and pop business, we don’t want to get too damn big because then they will start coming down on you.”

## **THE FDA: “HYDROGEN PEROXIDE CAN CAUSE SERIOUS HARM OR DEATH WHEN INGESTED”**

The FDA first became concerned about hydrogen peroxide in the 1980s.

Companies marketed hydrogen peroxide to those not just with cancer and other deadly diseases, but also AIDS, which was ravaging unchecked with no known treatments.

The FDA is charged with regulating the accuracy of medical claims, and it found the chemical was anything but miraculous.

In 1989, after reports of several injuries and at least one death, the FDA advised the public not to ingest or inject the chemical. It warned the chemical “can cause serious harm or death.”

In 2006, the FDA issued another warning, again stating the product “can cause serious harm or death when ingested.”

“No one has presented any evidence that hydrogen peroxide taken internally has any medical value,” said Dr. Steven Galson, then Director of the FDA’s Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. “In fact, consuming hydrogen peroxide in the manner touted by these websites could lead to tragic results.”

At the same time, the agency issued official warning letters to two companies, telling them to immediately stop promoting and selling the chemical.

One website, run by Mark Ovard, at the time based in Texas, got one of the [warning](#) letters.

In the letter, FDA officials [cited](#) several violations on Ovard’s website, dfwx.com, for marketing an unapproved drug and making false and misleading statements about the product. Ovard was instructed to correct the violations within 15 working days.

According to FDA spokesperson Lyndsay Meyer, warning letters often persuade companies to voluntarily comply with federal regulations. The agency’s next steps depend on the recipient’s response.

Documents obtained through a freedom of information request show Ovard disputed the charges in the warning letter.

He made slight changes to his website, adding information about diluting the concentrated chemical, and a statement that information on the site was for informational purposes only and had not been evaluated the FDA.

Four months later, in a follow-up letter, the FDA said the changes were not good enough.

The FDA [wrote](#), “Regardless of whether your website includes such disclaimers, it continues to promote your 35% Hydrogen Peroxide product to prevent, treat or cure disease.”

The FDA again told Ovard to immediately correct violations or face penalties, including possible criminal prosecution.

The FDA also notified state agencies, but they did not appear to have taken any action.

The Texas State Board of Pharmacy and the Texas Department of State Health Services both received copies of the November 2006 letter. Gay Dodson, Executive Director of Texas State Board of Pharmacy said because Ovard is not a licensed pharmacist and doesn’t own a pharmacy, any action at the state level would have been the responsibility of the Texas Department of State Health Services.

A spokesperson for the Texas Department of State Health Services acknowledged that the department has jurisdiction for such violations, but could find no documents to indicate the department took any action against Ovard or his website.

According to a 2007 internal [investigation](#) memo, FDA Investigator Connie Hannon-Rabel attempted to visit Ovard the following summer. In the memo, Hannon-Rabel wrote that she traveled to Wolfe City, a dusty town of 1,600 northeast of Dallas, in an attempt to meet with Ovard. Once there, she learned from locals that Ovard and a female companion—who they [referred](#) to as “the hydrogen peroxide people”—“had been gone for approximately 4–5 months.”

Wolfe City residents told the investigator Ovard and a female companion had several sports cars and recalled a “fancy carriage” used for weddings. In addition to selling hydrogen peroxide, Ovard, who describes himself as an ordained minister and retired judge, also [advertises](#) non-traditional wedding services on the dfwx website.

Hannon-Rabel’s memo indicates at least one Wolfe City resident was concerned about numerous shipments of 50-gallon containers of 35% hydrogen peroxide delivered to Ovard by a truck labeled with “hazardous” placards.

After the futile trip to Wolfe City, the investigator contacted Ovard by phone, but he refused to meet with her. He called her back on August 16, 2007, asking what needed to be done to “get the FDA off my back.”

According to the memo, Hannon-Rabel again explained the FDA’s concerns. Ovard promised to make the required changes within three days. He did not do so. On August 20, 2007, Hannon-Rabel tried to call him. Hannon-Rabel contacted an FDA compliance officer, who said she should give him more time but the [agency](#) “is not prepared to support any further regulatory action.

FDA documents report Ovard did not make the required changes, but did respond to the agency with long letters. One threatened legal action against the agency and another [theorized](#) that there are some who [believe](#) that “you are the evil F.D.A. out to kill them.”

In one letter, Ovard wrote,

*“The more you write—or I write—that the F.D.A. opposes my products, the more little-knowledge customers it will draw. If you know anything of the mindset of many involved in seeking alternative healthcare—either in desperation, personal beliefs, or lack of funds for traditional healthcare—you would accept what I am attempting to explain.”*

A New York City News Service reviewed dfwx.com in December 2016. One [page](#) claims falsely that “peroxide may be the greatest breakthrough for brain tumors” and suggests falsely the product helps [leukemia](#) patients. Another [page](#) is devoted to a book titled “True Power of Hydrogen Peroxide,” which also includes dosing instructions.

The FDA declined to comment on whether it is currently monitoring Ovard’s website.

FDA spokesperson Lyndsay Meyer said forcing individuals like Ovard to comply with federal regulations can be frustrating.

“They just stop and change their address or change their labeling and their company and then we’re back at square one, because now it’s a different company,” she said, adding that when that happens, the agency has to start all over again, even if the same individual is behind both companies.

“That’s one of the greatest challenges,” Meyer said. “And that’s if we can even find you.”

“The issue here with the small companies is that they’re a lot more nimble,” she said, adding that while smaller companies have more violations, it’s often more difficult to hold them accountable.

Meyer said the agency is short staffed and needs to target investigations carefully. Products regulated by the FDA make up 20 percent of the nation’s consumer spending, she said. But at the same time, the FDA receives an average of only \$8 a year from each U.S. taxpayer.

Mark Ovard could not be reached for comment despite repeated attempts.