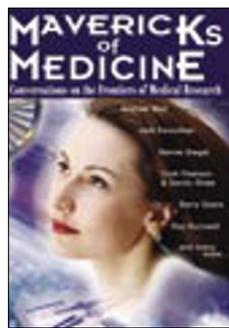


## How alternative is alternative medicine?



### **Mavericks of Medicine: Conversations on the Frontiers of Medicine**

**David Jay Brown**

Smart Publications, 2006  
384 pp., softcover, \$17.95  
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**Reviewed by Bruno J Strasser**

If you are interested in living longer and improving your sexual performance, *Mavericks of Medicine* may be the book for you. David Jay Brown presents 22 breezy interviews with unconventional biomedical thinkers, including leading figures in alternative medicine. Some of the personalities interviewed are renowned scientists, whereas others are better known for their popular books and diets. In answer to Brown's questions, mostly about aging and sex, they discuss the virtues of omega-3, coenzyme Q-10, stem cells and other products found, or soon to be found, in vitamin and supplements shops. They present various biological theories of aging, and reflections about the American health system in general and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in particular. As such, this book offers a valuable look at alternative medicine and an opportunity to reflect on its enduring popularity.

Brown is the author of three similar books and two science fiction novels. In *Mavericks of Medicine*, he asks questions in the same critical spirit as the PR officer of a company preparing a press release with his or her CEO: for example, "Could you talk a little bit about some of the beneficial effects your patients have had with carnosine supplements?"

Thus, readers may dismiss at the outset any expectations that Brown might confront some of the glaring contradictions between these different diets, or challenge the wildest assertions of his subjects. Not that he should have done so to avoid any legal trouble, since the book contains a disclaimer that the author and the publisher shall have "neither liability or responsibility to any person [for] damage caused."

Brown's writing style is repetitive ("he was ridiculed by his medical colleagues who thought the idea ridiculous") and his editing minimal. References to the papers mentioned by the interviewees to support their views are almost never given, perhaps because "the scientific literature in this country is entirely controlled." Instead, Brown provides the addresses of the authors' websites for those in search of an independent opinion. To enlighten the reader further, Brown offers

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a glossary defining peptides as "chemical messengers" and vitamins as compounds "which can not be synthesized by the body." He also makes clear that great minds inhabit almost exclusively male bodies (21 interviewees out of 22).

Brown's rationale for focusing on this particular set of individuals is that "all scientific and medical progress" has originated from "maverick thinkers." This common view of history is either trivially right or factually wrong. If "maverick" designates anyone who comes up with a new theory, it is trivially true, as progress entails novelty. If "maverick" refers to people considered to be 'quacks' it is factually wrong: William Harvey and Galileo were no more 'regarded as quacks' in their time than James Watson and David Baltimore are in ours. Furthermore, Brown seems to think that being considered wrong today increases your chances of being considered right tomorrow. This logic is hard to follow.

However, this book must be valuable. After all, the back cover blurbs include strong endorsement by two individuals who praise this "wonderful" book and the "intelligent" viewpoints it contains — including their own, since they are interviewed in the book.

Some of the scientists interviewed offer more interesting, if controversial, insights. Cell biologist Leonard Hayflick, for example, who developed the first normal human diploid cell line, presents reasonable arguments about the cellular aging process. He makes a good case for putting more emphasis on studying the aging process itself, rather than the diseases that generally occur in late age.

A number of the interviewees are highly critical, and rightly so, of possible conflicts of interest at the FDA and of the pharmaceutical industry's greed. But they fail to mention, and David Jay Brown is too shy to ask, if they themselves have any financial interest in the supplements they advocate. The 'add to cart' buttons decorating their websites suggest that their conflicts of interest are blatant, as they sell the supplements that they recommend, supposedly based on their "research."

The high price of prescription drugs, the emotional detachment of some doctors and the lack of a universal health care system in the US are also criticized several times in the book. These problems serve as good reminders that as consumers become increasingly disillusioned with orthodox medicine, many of them find alternative medicine more palatable. There is certainly much room for improvement in the FDA's independence, in the doctor-patient relationship, in the pharmaceutical industry's pricing strategies and in medicine's exaggeratedly optimistic promises of magic bullets.

Unfortunately, most of the proponents of alternative therapies in this book actually constitute a caricature of the most questionable aspects of contemporary medicine. Their reliance on simplistic models of biological processes, their blind faith in wonder pills, their vested interests in their own drugs and their constant pressure to consume more of them can hardly be considered an 'alternative' to mainstream medicine. As radical as they try to appear, they strongly contribute to the ongoing medicalization of modern life — by stimulating anxieties about sex, aging and intelligence, and by promoting the constant consumption of drugs as the answer.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

The author declares no competing financial interests.