

# 'Curing' ADHD

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*A Web search for "Curing ADHD" resulted in 33,000 hits. This is a curious result, considering the unanimous view of scientists that there is currently no cure for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.*

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I have a son who has just turned nine, and his teacher thinks he has ADHD. I don't want him taking drugs every day. Is there some natural way to treat it?

My seventeen-year-old was diagnosed with ADHD in grade six. I was told he would grow out of it by now, but he hasn't. His medication helps but I worry. Is there an alternative?

**T**hese are fairly typical of the calls and e-mails we receive at our Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs from parents concerned about their children who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). We explain that psychostimulant medications such as Ritalin (methylphenidate) are helpful in about 70 percent of cases, that they help control

symptoms, but that there is no cure and the disorder does not end with high-school graduation. We sometimes point out that the traditional classroom is an especially restrictive environment for children with ADHD and that in adulthood they often find employment where their work is not hampered, or may even be enhanced, by their levels of activity. Finally, we add that no link has been established to sugar, food coloring, or diet and that there is no cure for the disorder.

### ADHD: Why the Controversy?

ADHD is defined in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—IV, Text Revision (DSM IV-TR)* (APA 2000). It describes the behavior of persons who have a chronic level of inattention, impulsive hyperactivity, or both, to such an extent as to compromise daily functioning. There are three types: Predominantly Inattentive; Predominantly Hyperactive-impulsive; and Combined. The diagnostic criteria are spelled out in considerable detail and emphasize that developmental level, social setting, and cultural environment need to be taken into account when identifying the disorder. Three to seven percent of children have ADHD, and approximately three times more boys than girls are affected. Recent findings clearly indicate that the disorder is a lifelong, neurologically based condition (Weyandt 2001).

However, the diagnosis and treatment—even the existence—of ADHD are subjects of very real controversy. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) found it necessary to release a consensus statement confirming the scientific validity of the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD, including “the literal existence of the disorder” (NIH 2000). Critics have argued that ADHD should not be regarded as a distinct diagnostic entity, because its symptoms are ill-defined, unreliably differentiated from those of other conduct disorders, and not supported by sufficient empirical data (Hallahan and Kauffman 2003). While it is true that the identification of individuals with ADHD includes a substantial element of subjectivity, each objection has been dismissed, not only by the APA but also by the U.S. Surgeon General, the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (International Consensus Statement on ADHD 2002). Many of the critics have come from educational backgrounds where there is ongoing concern about misidentification and inappropriate prescription of medication for students who may be difficult to

manage in school, but who do not have a mental disorder.

The controversy about ADHD receives much attention in the mass media. Hundreds of “cures” and treatments of no demonstrated worth are promoted by individuals with questionable qualifications, as well as by outright hucksters. Most share a financial interest in persuading the public that treatment with psycho-stimulant drugs is ineffective, and even dangerous or life-threatening. Not only do they raise false hope by making promises that cannot be met, they encourage parents to avoid or discontinue medical treatment and educational/behavioral interventions of proven value.

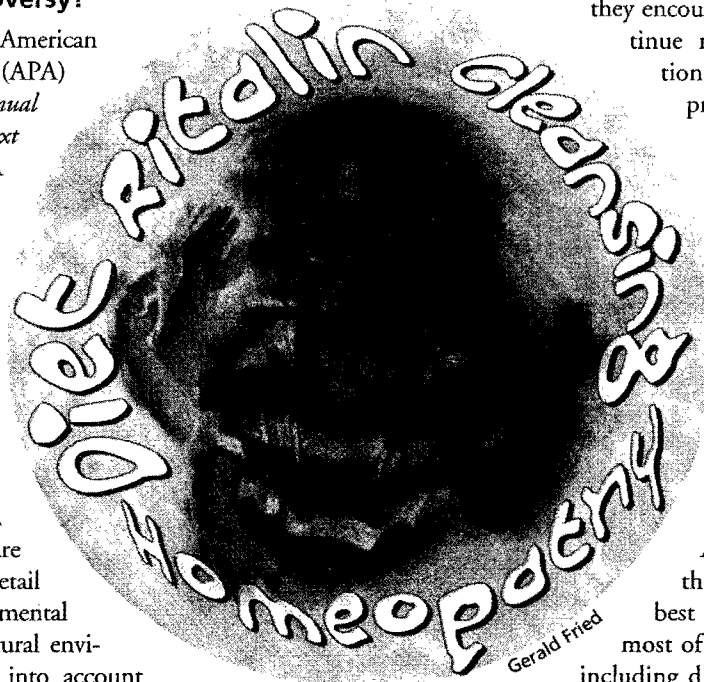
### Causes, Cures, Remedies, and Healing—for a Price

Given the abundance of products and services advertised online, I will review here only a small selection, chosen to reflect the diversity of claims for cures and to illustrate the outright misinformation that often accompanies them. Although offering treatments they claim to be superior to the best medical science has to offer, most of these Web sites play it safe by including disclaimers. Ironically, these frequently include the statement that their advice should not to be construed as a substitute for that of physicians or other health care professionals!

### Diet

The most widely promoted myth regarding ADHD is that it is caused by a poor diet. Sugar, artificial food coloring, preservatives, additives, refined carbohydrates, and dairy products are most frequently targeted, despite evidence to the contrary, much of it published as early as two decades ago and based on dozens of scientific studies (e.g., Conners 1980; Kavale and Forness 1983; Weyandt 2001; Wolraich, Wilson, and White 1995).

The “ADHD Information Library” Web site advertises Vaxa products (Cowan 2005). It tells parents what their children should *not* eat for the first two weeks of their “ADHD diet eating program for ADD and ADHD kids.” These restrictions are: (1) No dairy products (cow’s milk is “the single most important restriction”); it is further suggested that because “the brain is



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about 80 percent water,” seven to ten glasses a day might be “helpful all by itself”! (2) No yellow foods—but the author points out that bananas are, in point of fact, white—“just don’t eat the peel.” (3) No junk foods (“if it comes in a cellophane wrapper, don’t eat it,” presumably referring to both the wrapper and the contents). (4) No fruit juices (too much of the dreaded sugar). (5) Cut sugar intake by 90 percent. (6) Cut chocolate by 90 percent. (These reductions are suggested with no account being taken of the amount originally ingested!) (7) No aspartame. “None. Period.” (8) No processed meats and no

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MSG—“if the meat has chemicals listed that you can’t pronounce, don’t buy it.” (9) Cut fried foods by 90 percent. (10) Avoid food colorings whenever possible. The author concludes with the sage advice: “Just eat foods that God made for a while”! (Cowan 2005).

The Web site includes a disclaimer stating in part that the information on ADHD is presented for educational purposes only and that “products mentioned herein are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.” However, the reader is encouraged to purchase a homeopathic remedy priced at \$36.95 per bottle, with three varieties suggested for a month’s supply. “Millions of people are being placed on activity modifying drugs for their ADHD/ADD but many of these drugs can have dangerous side effects. Attend is a safe, all-natural alternative to these ADHD/ADD drugs. . . . Attend is not just for children and teens. Attend also works great for adult ADD . . .” (GotSupplements.com 2005).

No evidence is offered in support of these claims; the words “safe” and “all-natural” are key in persuading the hopeful.

## Cleansing

Curezone.com (2005), whose motto is “Education Instead of Medicating,” explains that ADHD (which it describes as a learning disability) is typically the result of one of three factors: a blow to the head; “chemical trauma” manifesting as allergies and food intolerances, often as a consequence of maternal drug ingestion (e.g., birth control pills or antibiotics) before, or during, pregnancy and delivery (if this were true, few mothers would be exempt from placing their babies at risk); and heredity (“better diet can even correct that one”)! This Web site recommends “eliminating sugars (fruits, juices, milk products, and refined, simple carbohydrates) from the children’s diet,” and claims Dr. Atkins found that this “can correct most ADHD.” While advocating the adoption of an “Attention Deficit Disorder diet” as the first step in the “Prevention and Curing Protocol,” Curezone.com recommends “Body cleansing for kids,” noting it is an “extremely important part of every prevention and curing program.” This bizarre step in the protocol has three parts: parasite cleanse (recommended without reference to any clinical evidence of infection); dental cleanup (for children older than eight, because of supposedly toxic amalgam fillings); and liver cleanse/flush (to remove stones and impurities). The protocol prescribes physical activity for Attention Deficit Disorder because “it helps cleansing, it brings balance and relieves stress.” In fact noncompetitive activities such as in-line skating or skateboarding, in which a child with ADHD experiences success, can help build self-esteem (Weill 1995). Sweating for ADD is described as a powerful way to clear accumulated toxins: “It is known that some modern industrial toxins and pesticides can leave your body only through sweat glands.”<sup>1</sup>

Considerable space is devoted to parasites, along with more than sixty pages of graphic photographs, just to show how repulsive these little animals look, and perhaps to create some anxiety in potential clients. Herbs are recommended to eliminate parasites, and a specific brand, Clarkia, comes highly recommended. This is a formulation produced by Hulda Regehr Clark, whose books include *The Cure for HIV and AIDS*, *The Cure for All Advanced Cancers*, and surely her magnum opus, *The Cure for All Diseases*. CureZone.com receives a percentage of all sales of books and products when clients link to the relevant purchase site from the CureZone.com host site. Clark, incidentally, has been the subject of several court cases and now spends most of her time at the Century Nutrition Clinic in Mexico (Clark 2005).

## Homeopathy/Naturopathy

While many sites claiming cures for ADHD emphasize diet, nearly all that I visited create and capitalize on a fear of physician-prescribed medications to help peddle their untested remedies. An example follows (the boldface is in the original):

Rather than **prescribing strong** and sometimes **addictive psychiatric drugs**, (Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall) naturopathic approaches to the treatment of ADHD and ADD take a more holistic look at the individual and take into account diet, lifestyle, personality type, surroundings, and emotional factors.

Natural remedies are used to **gently and effectively** treat the symptoms, while at the same time helping the person to **heal** and to reach a state of balance and health.

The natural approach is less harmful and more thorough and has a **greater chance** of curing the problem altogether, instead of keeping the individual on psychiatric drugs for many years.

This is very important, **especially** in the case of children, because of the frequent side effects of prescription drugs and the risk of addiction (NativeRemedies.com 2005).

Note the weasel words: *strong*, *addictive*, and *psychiatric* with reference to prescription medication; *gently*, *effectively*, and *heal* applied to the product being promoted. Following that is a pitch for Focus, a product containing six plant extracts, with no evidence for its effectiveness or mention of possible side effects. There is, of course, the usual selection of testimonials that so frequently accompanies advertising for products of this kind. A bottle of Focus will last twenty-five to thirty days at a cost of \$26.95 plus shipping. For children as young as three, Focus may be combined with BrightSpark, a homeopathic ADHD "remedy."

It is outrageous that the purveyors of these unproven treatments are taking money from vulnerable parents desperately seeking help for their children. But of equal concern is their deliberate—and often successful—ploy of creating unreasonable fears and anxiety about the use of prescription medications of proven efficacy. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2005), methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta) and other stimulant medications are both safe and effective. When combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy, "about 80 percent of children with ADHD who are treated with stimulants improve a great deal" (American Academy of Pediatrics 2005). This advice is supported by an extensive scientific literature involving double-blind controlled studies (see Spencer et al. 1996 for a review). It is important that the correct dosage and most appropriate medication be determined individually, a process that usually takes several weeks. Side effects, which are not common, are mild and short-lived, and usually occur early in the treatment. The most prevalent include decreased appetite, weight loss, sleep problems, headaches, jitteriness, social withdrawal, and stomach aches (American Academy of Pediatrics 2005; Greenhill, Halperin, and Abikoff 1999).

### The Tip of the Iceberg

CureZone.com was founded in 1997, and by the end of 2001, it had become one of the three most visited "natural-health" Web sites. It claims to openly welcome information, to be not for profit, and thus forced to solicit donations. Thousands of individuals have submitted their stories and articles for publication on the site, and CureZone promotes more than sixty e-mail "support groups" with over 50,000 members (CureZone.com 2005). Yet it is only one among a multitude of similarly dedicated sites clamoring to advocate cures and treatments for ADHD, along with other mental-health conditions and disabilities. Besides the few described in this article, "cures" and "effective treatment" of ADHD are to be found at Web sites representing behavioral optometry (vision therapy),

acupressure and acupuncture, chiropractic, megavitamins and mineral supplements, EEG biofeedback, and applied kinesiology—and this is only a partial listing.

The proclamation, "At Cure Zone, we do not recognize word 'incurable,'" (*sic*) (CureZone.com 2005b) is insidiously tempting, especially for vulnerable parents. It is, unfortunately, less dramatic to honestly and openly state, as does the Web site of the American Academy of Pediatrics: "You may have heard media reports or seen advertisement for 'miracle cures' for ADHD. . . . At this time, there is no scientifically proven cure for this condition."

Unfortunately, as readers of this magazine must be well aware, reason speaks with a measured voice; flim-flam's is shrill and, for many, enticing.

### Note

1. I could find no evidence for this statement. It may stem from an "urban myth" apparently begun by an anonymous e-mail in 1999. This claimed that using antiperspirants can cause cancer by preventing the sweat glands from excreting toxins. Mervyn Elgart, a professor emeritus of dermatology at George Washington University, has referred to the claim as "a bunch of crap" (Urbanlegends 2005).

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