

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Scourge of Snake Oil Salesmen Bids an Early Farewell

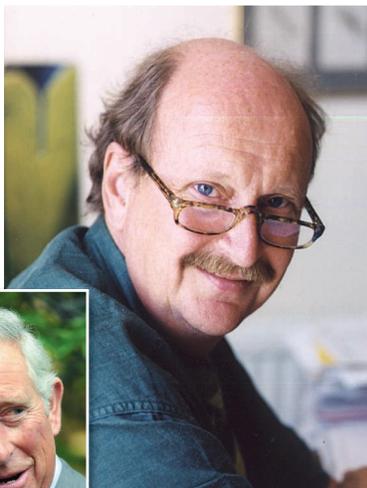
When Edzard Ernst became professor of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, he thought he was in for a quiet life. “The field is not exactly mainstream medicine, and Exeter is not the center of the academic world,” he remembers reasoning.

Eighteen years later, he has publicly clashed with the heir to the British throne, been investigated for an alleged breach of confidentiality, and forced to retire early in a deal to save the department he helped build. “It has been rougher than I expected,” he admits.

Many see Ernst, 63, as the world’s leading figure in research on CAM. “His output is incredible,” says Michael Baum, a professor emeritus of surgery at University College London who has collaborated with Ernst. But Ernst’s fierce and often undiplomatic criticism of unproven therapies has also made him many enemies. “He is like a rottweiler; he won’t let go,” Baum says. At a farewell press briefing in London last week, Ernst called Prince Charles a “snake oil salesman”—a headlinemaking sneer he doesn’t regret. “He owns a firm that sells a tincture of artichoke and dandelion that supposedly detoxifies the body. To me that is snake oil,” he says.

A native of Wiesbaden, Germany, Ernst wasn’t always a critic of complementary medicine. On the contrary, his first job after becoming a physician was at Munich’s Hospital for Natural Healing, a bulwark of alternative therapies. “I was really impressed by what I saw,” he recalls. Later, after he became the head of the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the University of Vienna, Ernst subjected alternative medicine to the rigors of science in his spare time. “I thought there was a real possibility of discovering some fundamental mechanisms,” he says. So when CAM supporter and construction magnate Sir Maurice Laing gave the University of Exeter £1.5 million to establish the world’s first chair in complementary medicine, Ernst took the opportunity with both hands.

But over the years, he has reached a sobering verdict. In a 2008 paper, Ernst summed up the treatments he had found



Convert. Edzard Ernst was once “really impressed” by alternative medicine but now criticizes Prince Charles’s promotion of unproven therapies.

to do more good than harm—a meager list of 20 therapies, including music therapy against anxiety, acupuncture against nausea, and aromatherapy in cancer palliation. Most were herbal medicines, however. “And those are not surprising at all, since there are pharmacologically active compounds in plants,” he says. Ernst didn’t discover a single case in which a fundamentally implausible treatment, such as homeopathy’s infinite solutions, had an effect. The stream of negative results angered CAM supporters. “They thought he was placed there to prove that alternative medicine works,” Baum says.

Meanwhile, Ernst took aim at others in the burgeoning field of CAM research as well. He’s highly critical of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, for instance; in a recent article in which he examined 27 NCCAM-funded trials of herbal medicine, he found “a plethora of serious concerns,” including a lack of laboratory tests of key safety parameters and a low or moderate risk of bias in 15 of the studies. The center, which also studies force fields and distance healing, should focus on the most plausible therapies, Ernst says. “NCCAM is swallowing up more than \$100 million a year and has little to show for it,” he says.

Klaus Linde, a one-time collaborator

who has worked at the Center for Complementary Medicine Research in Munich, Germany, says the quality of Ernst’s own work has declined in recent years. “He does not always conform to the methodical standards he demands from others,” says Linde, who points to errors in a recent systematic review of acupuncture. Ernst admits to minor mistakes but says they don’t affect the paper’s conclusions.

Ernst has become embroiled in several high-profile affairs. In 2005, for instance, a scandal erupted in the United Kingdom when he dropped out of a panel investigating the potential contributions of CAM to the British National Health Service (NHS). The report, commissioned by Prince Charles and led by economist Christopher Smallwood, concluded that replacing some mainstream treatments with alternative medicine could substantially cut costs. Days before the report’s publication, Ernst called it “outrageous and deeply flawed” in a newspaper article. “They were suggesting asthma could be treated with homeopathic medicine. That would have killed 150 patients a year,” he says.

The spat nearly cost him his job. Prince Charles’s private secretary accused Ernst of violating a confidentiality agreement, triggering a 13-month investigation at Exeter that eventually cleared Ernst of any wrongdoing. “But the university ceased all fundraising for my unit, and my department was systematically destroyed,” he says. Recently, in exchange for an assurance that the department will live on, Ernst agreed with Exeter to officially retire, though he has been rehired on a half-time basis for another year. He hopes his successor will be “a really good scientist and maybe someone a little more diplomatic.”

Ernst’s legacy, Baum says, is a public and government more aware of the controversies surrounding CAM, especially in the United Kingdom. Last year, the science and technology committee of the British House of Commons concluded, based in part on Ernst’s evidence, that NHS should cease funding homeopathy and that homeopathic medicines should not be allowed to make claims of efficacy. For Ernst, it was a proud moment. Science may never win the battle against snake oil, he says, “but that shouldn’t mean that we all have to pay for it.”

—KAI KUPFERSCHMIDT

Kai Kupferschmidt is a writer in Berlin.

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