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A pioneer in menopause research, Dr. Utian founded the world's first menopause clinic in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1966 and established the Cleveland Menopause Clinic in 1983.

Recipient of many research grants and awards, he is the author of more than 150 scientific publications and five books. He is the Honorary Past-President of the International Menopause Society and Honorary Founding President and Executive Director of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS). He is also Chairman of the Council of Affiliated Menopause Societies (CAMS) of the International Menopause Society.

Selling Menopause

The days when the definition of “menopause” was a one-liner in medical textbooks (“Menopause is physiological amenorrhea”) are long gone. Gone too are the days when the word “menopause” was not mentioned in public by any self-respecting woman. Nowadays, the “M word” is a healthcare subject that is inspiring musicals, and a ‘title’ launching a thousand opinion-based books and magazine articles. Above all, the word “menopause” has, unfortunately, become a selling tool. In simple terms, menopause has regrettably graduated into an industry!

This observation may seem to be particularly hypercritical, coming from someone such as myself, who has made a major part of my medical career out of the educational, research and clinical issues regarding menopause, and perhaps in my capacity as Executive Director of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS), an organization whose very existence is based on menopause. But there is indeed a significant difference that needs to be highlighted. It is one thing to attempt to bring scientific clarification to all issues about menopause, or to attempt to deliver state-of-the-science, high-quality, preventive and therapeutic health care to all women going through (and beyond) the menopause transition. It is quite another thing to use menopausal women as a “market” and to knowingly and consciously attempt to industrialize, commercialize, and sell inappropriate “remedies” purely for the sake of gathering the almighty dollar.

The Science of Selling

So, let us consider some of the key selling words and clichés that are out there in the real world and that are being used so successfully in expanding this market. When you see or hear these key selling words and phrases, guard your purses and wallets. Better yet, warn your patients to do likewise!

Using words that sell things more effectively is a modern, fully developed science with its own literature and textbooks.^{1,2} Selling menopause is no longer a subject for amateurs. The science of selling includes utilizing unique, special-impact words, powerful verbs to add muscle to the message, negative qualities to denigrate the competition, purposefully couched terminology to shade the truth and intentionally mislead, and so-called “magic-response words,” which are perennials of the advertisers who have learned to use them to appeal to basic human needs. To repeat, selling is a science, menopause is an industry, products are being sold, and a gullible public is buying.

This commentary is not about what the public is buying—much of that you may or may not know. The e-mail letterbox of The North American Menopause Society

receives daily “come-ons” plugging all kinds of menopause-related products. Either way, it is really important that you find out what your patients may be buying and using, by asking them about alternative product usage when you elicit their medical histories. This is essential because whatever products they may be using can have an impact on their state of health and, indeed, may even interact with what you are already prescribing.

Buzzwords

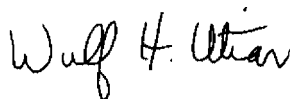
So, then, what are the selling buzzwords, the wallet-watcher warning clichés? Some of the most successful words and phrases include the following: “youth-enhancing,” “revive,” “renew,” “reinvigorate,” “rejuvenate,” “slow down” and even “reduce the aging process,” “replace flab with muscle,” “guaranteed weight loss,” “ignite your sex drive,” “rejuvenate your love life,” “boost your sexual performance,” “improve your memory and alertness,” “eliminate wrinkles,” “smooth your skin,” “feel younger,” “clinically proven,” “scientifically tested,” “important medical breakthrough,” “nature’s alternative to drugs/hormones,” “natural remedy,” “all-natural,” “powerful anti-oxidant,” “organic,” “herbal,” “pure,” and so on and so on.¹ You get the message! So does the buying public but, perhaps, in a way quite different from the way in which you read the same messages.

We are all under pressure today during the clinical consultation. Time is our only commodity. Patients reading attractive and enticing advertising copy want bioidentical hormones, natural products, strong anti-oxidants, over-the-counter plant estrogens, hormone alternatives, and herbal hormones. The anti-marketing buzzwords, often used to create doubt about science itself, have made them suspicious of FDA-compliant and approved prescription

drugs. Too often in these challenging times, women see the healthcare provider as the stuffy medical scientist, the traditionalist, and the closed-minded member of the medical establishment. The sharp marketer is trading on that. The challenge, then, is to explain, in our very limited amount of time, that unproven remedies—however attractively described and marketed—remain just that.

Watch Out for Snake Oil Salesmen

I do not have a simple answer for how to deal with this tidal wave of spurious marketing of dubious products. When a patient tells me what she has been sold on, the best I can do is respond by expressing surprise that she is willing to allow herself to be a guinea pig for an uncontrolled safety/efficacy experiment, when she has previously expressed concern about remedies for which we have a great deal of safety and efficacy data. Or, I ask why she would be taking something for which she has no medical need. However we handle this situation, the message to be given is to watch out for the snake oil salesman. In this instance, the downside for patients could be more than financial loss; it could very well be a matter of their health.



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