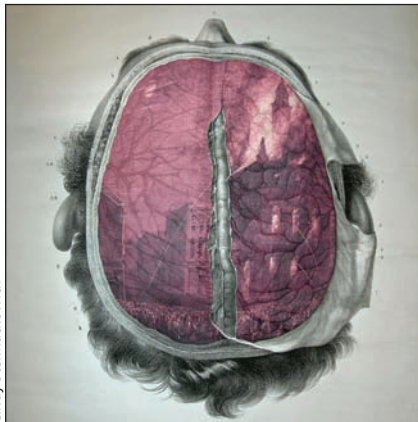


ESSAY

# From plunger to *Punkt-roller*: a century of weight-loss quackery

Cindy Stelmackowich



Cindy Stelmackowich, *The Last Charge of Napoleon's Old Guard at the Battle of Waterloo, Belgium — June 18, 1815* (2008) (detail). Ultrachromium print. 36 × 51 cm.

Call me pornographer  
 clasping fast to phantasm  
 eros engaging ectoplasm  
 lurid lens unfettered  
 by membrane or morality.  
 My mission subcutaneous  
 dare not to undermine  
 science  
 my wholesome desire  
 stroking toward  
 scattered shrapnel of the sublime  
 shivering glimpse even of the divine

I see vehicles  
 of demise  
 still life in profusion

I draw everything  
 but breath  
 and thus conclusion.

**Kevin Matthews**  
 Poet  
**Cindy Stelmackowich PhD**  
 Artist  
 Ottawa, Ont.

These images are from *Anatomy: In Ruins and Remade*, an exhibition at the Patrick Mikhail Gallery in Ottawa, Ont., Feb. 4–Mar. 4, 2009. Ms. Stelmackowich is an artist, curator and teacher whose artwork related to medical science has been exhibited across North America.

Mr. Matthews has performed his poetry in front of audiences around Canada — from hundreds to handfuls, and from symphonic concert halls to correctional facilities.

“People trust the quack with their lives who would not trust him with the loan of a sixpence. They seem to believe advertised testimonials as if they were guaranteed by a prominent physician, forgetting that many obscure prints can be got to write any falsehoods and back up any quackery under the sun. These lying testimonials are paraded in papers that ought to know better than to insert them, and the public believe in their statements as if they were scientific truths.”<sup>1</sup> — Dr. Nathaniel Edward Yorke-Davies, 1901

From *I Love Lucy*-style body jigglers, to heated “slenderizing” jeans and tens of thousands of fad diets, weight-loss quackery has dominated this past century’s snake-oil market. While the marketing of hope will always have its victims, with some of these products it is truly difficult to understand the mentality of the buyer. Did people in the late 1800s really find hand-drawn before-and-after testimonial pictures to be compelling? Was

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there really a large German market for the turn of the century’s *Punkt-roller*, the suction-cupped rolling pin? Were there armies of jiggling bodies in basements hoping their weight would bounce away?

Sadly, the answer to all of those questions is a resounding “yes”; preying on the vulnerabilities often associated with obesity has shown itself to be a lucrative business.

Unfortunately, it was not only unscrupulous business people preying on the vulnerable, sometimes it was medical doctors. Take for example Dr. Thomas Lawton. In his 1917 book, *The Lawton Method of Weight Reduction*, he reports, “I have reduced the weight of thousands of other people and can do it for you. Get that firmly in your mind — you are going to be brought to a normal, comfortable and vigorously healthy weight.”<sup>2</sup> What was his method? Believe it or not it involved



Roger Collier

This selection of the author’s mechanical “weight-loss” devices includes, in the foreground, the *Punkt-roller* from Germany, the Knead-Away (left), which was billed by Sears Roebuck as “the scientific way to remove fat,” and the “Redusaway” (right), which when plugged in vibrates and ironically blows hot air.

Roger Collier



Ironically, this “Relax-a-cizor” relied on electric shocks for treatment of obesity. More than 400 000 units were sold between 1949 and 1970 when sales were stopped by the United States Food and Drug Administration, which found that the device purportedly led to spontaneous abortions.

using what looks like a toilet plunger to “dissolve” fatty tissue.

Fad diets are not new either. In Dr. C. Stanford Read’s 1909 book, *Fads and Feeding*, he soundly bashes a popular diet of the day, the “Salisbury diet,” which apparently involved consuming large quantities of rump-steak, cod-fish and hot water. Read’s own recommendations seem similarly suspect. They included living by the sea-

Roger Collier



This device, which was sold in the early 1930s, was not only marketed for weight loss, it apparently also treated constipation, atherosclerosis, rheumatism, neuritis, insomnia and wrinkles, of course.

Roger Collier



Visit any drugstore and you’ll find that there is no shortage of magic pills for obesity, but that’s nothing new. Of this grouping of products from the past, the only one that “worked” was Obese Factor — yes, amphetamines do cause weight loss. Ayds, a brand name that wouldn’t resonate very well these days, was marketed by glamorous Hollywood movie stars throughout the early 1970s.

side, having a, “tumblerful” of hot water half an hour before breakfast and avoiding soups at dinner while of course minimizing everything that tastes good.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, even today it seems that the possession of a medical degree does not automatically guarantee that the holder possesses ethics, morals or a respect for the scientific method (see page 367). While it may be fair to explain the turn-of-the-century doctors’ recommendations as being the products of a belief-based, rather than our current evidence-based focus to medicine, what of our modern day Lawtons with their financially driven weight-loss plans and products?

So while you view some of my

collection of memorabilia bear in mind that there is no shortage of weight-loss collectibles in today’s marketplace and, as always, the adage, “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is,” holds true today as much as ever.

**Yoni Freedhoff MD**

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**REFERENCES**

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2. Lawton T. *The Lawton method of weight reduction*. New York: Stein, Berlau & Creange Press; 1917.
3. Stanford Read C. *Fads and feeding*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company; 1909.

**Online extras.** Additional images of historic weight-loss products and a podcast of a weight-loss record are posted online at [www.cmaj.ca](http://www.cmaj.ca). The recording is from the set of 11 records (right), purchased by Miss Esther N. Horn of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, in 1922, which was marketed as a means to treat, “undue fleshiness” without “under-nourishment” through dance and calisthenics.



Roger Collier