



## The talisman effect

Early most mornings, I shuffle into the kitchen to make coffee for the family. You may visualise the cupboard in our kitchen above the counter to my right. This is where the family's store of vitamins is kept. There are bottles of vitamins liberally labelled from "A" to "Z". There is vitamin C and lots of Bs, and then a whole lot of minerals, such as zinc and magnesium, and even selenium. Our kitchen cupboard may hold the whole of the periodic table for all I know.

A cursory inspection of members of the family arriving for breakfast reveals no obvious evidence of scurvy, pellagra or beriberi in these consumers of vitamin-enriched cereals, so I conducted a family focus group to find out the reason for this profligate consumption of the earth's natural resources. The answers were "because they are good for you", "they prevent me from getting colds", and "they will stop me getting Alzheimer's like you, father".

I have rejected their conclusions with the contempt that medicine reserves for non-believers of the scientific method. There is no hard evidence for all these vitamins and minerals, I cried unconvincingly to the ranks of the opposition. This is why I have come to the conclusion that the multibillion dollar vitamin business is based on what I call the talisman effect.<sup>1</sup> A talisman is protection against evil or the evil eye, or against disease. Usually, it takes the form of a piece of jewellery or a pendant hung round the neck to provide magical protection (from the Greek word *telesma* which means to consecrate). Almost all cultures and religions have signs, figures or artifacts that act vicariously to protect the wearer against misfortune and disease, e.g. the crucifix worn by Christians, St Christopher medals, the sign on the door, the black ribbons on the trucks, and the amulets and wristbands on babies in the traditional world.

Some of my older Moslem patients wear a *taweez*, a cloth amulet around the neck, which may contain verses from The Quran such as the *Ayat ul Kursi*. Zulu children who I see in the clinics, especially those from the rural areas, come in with a small skin bag (called *incweba*) which has been filled with protective medicine (called *amakhubalo*). It is hung around the neck. Occasionally, there may be a small bottle, vial of herbal medicine, or a small carpal bone of an animal.

Somehow, Western people feel that these are the superstitions of indigenous people, but on deeper investigation, it seems that we are all superstitious. Superstition is really a perjorative word, as it implies skepticism about someone else's beliefs, yet superstition still appears to be a given for all human beings, despite logic and technology. If you skim down the aisles of Clicks or Dis-Chem, and read the labels on the shelves of vitamins, you get the impression that after a couple of pills, you will be ready for lift off. The talisman effect of vitamins and many modern interventions in providing protection against illness seems to be cryptically embedded in our human psyche. How does the ritual of the medication, the belief in its efficacy and the feeling of protection affect the outcome or protection from illness? The interventions may indeed have some benefits, but like the placebo effect in treatment, the talisman effect in prevention is more deeply hidden in our atavistic belief systems.

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### References

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