The price of health

What a beautiful day. The sun is shining, the sky is clear and you feel ready. It is time to grab that good old bike. The plan? Cycle until your thoughts get lost and your body gets numb. It has been a while since you last enjoyed the pleasure of exercise and quietness. Suddenly, you hear a Formula 1 sound and see an athletic cycler shouting at you from behind. Next thing you know, you are wounded and on the floor. Was that a bike or a spacecraft from NASA? It had to be a rocket, otherwise the passenger would not be dressed like an astronaut. He comes to your aid, and you confirm that yes indeed, he does look like a spaceman. From top to bottom, there is no single part of his body that is not covered by a piece of cycling equipment. Aerodynamic helmet, cycler goggles, futuristic watch… the list could go on and on. After the little accident, you decide to go home and heal your wounds. For once, electric scooters are not to blame.

But who is to blame? Why are there cyclists equipped to do the Tour de France when in reality they are doing the Tour de Solna? Why are sugar-based pills being taken as an all-in-one cure? Why are diet books being sold today at the same rate as toilet paper was in March 2020? These apparently unrelated scenarios have a common denominator: we decided to pay for our health.

And by decided, of course, I mean pushed. Companies are constantly pushing us to buy products. To do so, they create necessities out of nowhere. This is just an intermediate step in the beautiful drama called “The money in your pocket is now the money in my pocket”. We are told that we need vitamin supplements to be healthy. Every day, our hair needs to be cleansed from all the oils that our skin produces naturally. The wrinkles that reveal our age must be hidden, or even better, erased… And of course, the only way to achieve it is none other than money.

This is an old tale that rings a bell or two. But it is especially outrageous when we are told that our health is a pay-to-win game. It is easy to exploit fears and insecurities, and the wellness industry thrives on those. According to research by the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness industry is valued at $4.5 trillion and is continuing to grow at a historic rate [1]. From an investor point of view, wellness pays off. The industry’s expansion is clear: wellness tourism, wellness apps, wellness at the workplace… these concepts are growing and becoming popular [2] [3]. But is it necessary to go to India to find peace, is health something to be downloaded, is yoga the solution to stressful working environments?

The dark side of the wellness industry is born when insecurity exploits are combined with unreasonable expectations of “becoming your better self”. Wellness has become synonymous with productivity and self-optimization. The idea that you can buy an improved version of yourself is, simply put, attractive. The fast, easy path. But wellness isn’t something that can be consumed. My concern with this path is not only that it can be a scam, but that it poses a threat to the consumer’s mental health [4]. What happens when you fail to fulfil expectations? When you realize you are not a fit cycler despite all the protein shakes, when you realize you are still bald despite the caffeine shampoo, when you realize that despite the expensive meditation retreat… you still have cancer? It surely must not be what you bought, people on the ad told nothing but success stories! It has to be faced, you are the problem. And that “problem” is now crying and trying to figure out what went wrong. Ironically, the wellness industry is disrupting wellness.

A substantial amount of the wellness industry products are simply not proven to work. Scientifically, that is. For example, homeopathy, vitamins and hair-loss treatments often fall into this category [5] [6] [7]. Having vitamins for breakfast will not make you feel better, but will make your pee tremendously valuable! The problem: it can be as difficult to prove that the product works as it can be to prove that it does **not** work. Unsurprisingly, it took a while to prove that smoking caused lung cancer. This is because correlation does not imply causation and because companies have moneyed interests. Science, rigorous science, is painfully slow. Marketing, however, is stupidly fast. “I am doing the new carnivore diet. Still stuck with Keto diet? That’s so 2017!”.

Health might be difficult to come by in certain situations. Being aware of your insecurities and fears is key to avoid falling victim to the wellness industry. Chances are that spending money on a miraculous pill or a trendy diet book will not solve any serious problem. Good sleep, a diverse diet and an active social and physical life are your best bets at staying healthy. It is okay to be afraid of ageing or cancer. It is also okay to accept them when they come. What really matters is to spend effort instead of money, to go to the doctor instead of the beauty salon. And if you wake up and decide to enjoy the sunny day as an alternative to the Tour de Solna... you might catch yourself thinking, what a beautiful day.

References

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