

THE BANDWAGONS OF MEDICINE

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Although medical progress has been extraordinary, its path has often been directed by the overwhelming acceptance of unproved but popular ideas—the bandwagons of medicine. Some of these ideas eventually prove valid, and their uncritical acceptance is belatedly justified. More often, however, they are disproved and abandoned, or replaced by another bandwagon. A new idea can frequently help overcome stagnation and inertia, but unfortunately, an object in motion tends to remain in motion, and the bandwagon becomes an overwhelming force.

How do ideas attain acceptance among physicians without rigorous proof of their validity? Moreover, how do valid ideas become extended beyond their proper limitations? The development of a bandwagon is a dynamic process, involving a number of social and scientific factors. A single advocate or group of advocates may be able to generate the interest necessary to launch the idea. Once other investigators become enthusiastic, preconceived notions blur the distinction between quality and quantity of evidence. Clinicians, laymen, the media, and various interest groups all have a role in sustaining unproved ideas. Physicians often accept a new idea because it offers a simple solution to a complex problem. Pressured by their profession to keep abreast of current trends, physicians must absorb an abundance of new material. Therefore, they may read uncritically or concentrate their reading on nontechnical journals and abstracts. The public, in search of a panacea, exerts further pressure on the clinician. The mass media give the idea momentum by publishing opinions, conclusions, and extrapolations as data. Research foundations, government agencies, and private industries may each have a vested interest in the idea, endowing it with official sanction and monetary support.

Once a hypothesis is generally accepted, further investigation is considered perfidious and is curbed by the reluctance to fund dissidents. Though the idea may become orthodox, doubts persist among an unconvinced minority, because the evidence is not conclusive. Eventually

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