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Bestselling ‘pH Miracle’ author heads to jail



Robert O. Young, author of the pH Miracle diet book series, looks to defense attorney Wil Rumble after a bailiff placed him in handcuffs in a Vista, Calif., courtroom Thursday. (Teri Figueroa / San Diego Union-Tribune)

By Teri Figueroa
San Diego Union-Tribune

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San Diego — The author of the popular pH Miracle book series will spend the next five months in jail, after admitting that he illegally treated patients at his luxury ranch without any medical or scientific training.

Robert O. Young was taken into custody in a San Diego County courtroom Thursday. He had been convicted last year on two counts of practicing medicine without a license and pleaded guilty earlier this year to two additional felony counts.

The 65-year-old Young didn’t speak during the hearing, which marked the end of a three-year criminal case that highlighted his controversial theories and the pricey treatments he offered to seriously ill or dying patients, who in some cases were given intravenous fluids mixed with baking soda at \$500 a pop.

He’s the author of several books, including the bestselling “The pH Miracle: Balance Your Diet, Reclaim Your Health,” which was published in 2002 and later translated into more than 18 languages. His work, and treatments at the ranch, were based on the theory that acidity in the body is the cause of disease, and that an alkaline diet is the answer.

Superior Court Judge Richard Whitney said Thursday that while there was some benefit to Young’s work, the author — who has no post-high school degrees from accredited institutions — had oversimplified the “extremely complex fields” of microbiology and hematology.

“I think where it all went very wrong is you became overly aggressive and overly confident in areas you just had no knowledge about,” Whitney said.

The judge said Young had “stolen time” from terminally ill people, including some who “were bilked out of tens of thousands of dollars.”

Young was arrested in January 2014 after an investigation started by the state medical board. His alkaline theories, rooted in work by an 1800s French scientist, were not technically on trial, although they were center stage during the criminal case.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Gina Darvas called Young the “wizard of pHraud” and painted him as a charlatan who made money peddling pseudoscience to desperate, dying people. Darvas said Young’s degrees came from a nonaccredited “diploma mill” where Young went from a bachelor’s degree to a doctorate in about eight months in 1995.

During the trial, defense attorney Paul Pflingst argued that Young was under attack because he espoused alternative beliefs. He said people sought Young’s help precisely because he was not a doctor, but rather a naturopathic practitioner.

A jury convicted Young in early 2016 on two counts of practicing medicine without a license but deadlocked on several remaining charges. Young, who faced retrial on those counts, instead struck a deal in April that put an end to the criminal case.

Under the deal, Young was sentenced to three years, eight months in custody, although he probably will serve only half that time for good behavior. He is also being credited for spending roughly the last year under house arrest.

Aside from jail time, Darvas insisted on another condition: Young had to make a public admission declaring that he is not a microbiologist, hematologist, medical or naturopathic doctor or trained scientist. He gave those admissions when he entered his guilty plea in April.

teri.figueroa@sduniontribune.com

Figueroa writes for the San Diego Union-Tribune

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Teri Figueroa

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Teri Figueroa covers courts, crime and breaking news for The San Diego Union-Tribune. A native Californian, she joined the North County Times in 2002, and the U-T in 2012. Figueroa reported on the 2003 and 2007 wildfires, and covered the criminal cases against Richard Tuite and John Gardner III, as well as war crimes cases. A San Diego State University graduate, Figueroa has won multiple journalism awards for her work.

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