The doctor’s got your goat

IN THE 1920S, A TESTICLE TRANSPLANT WAS A ‘CURE’ FOR IMPotence

BY Katherine Hobson

No one has ever gone broke overestimating the desire of men to boost their sexual prowess. But decades before Viagra, another, less medically sound solution came sweeping across the Kansas plains: transplanted goat testicles.

An idea like that has to come to the right man at the right time. Such a perfect storm happened in 1916, when John Brinkley—an ambitious young man with a medical degree from a diploma mill—took a temporary job as house doctor at the Swift meatpacking plant in Kansas City, Kan. Brinkley was supposed to treat humans, but another species caught his eye. Meat inspectors, he learned, had a high opinion of goats. They were exceedingly clean and not prone to passing on diseases to humans. Brinkley also couldn’t help but notice that even the slaughterhouse didn’t dampen the caprine libido.

He kept those admirable qualities in mind a few years later when he set up practice in Milford, a tiny Kansas hamlet with one bank, one post office, and 200 or so residents. The isolation wasn’t an accident. Brinkley had been trained in the so-called eclectic school of medicine, which emphasized herbal healing. But the American Medical Association, which was slowly becoming the governing body for the profession, didn’t recognize the school. Eclectic adherents often took jobs where “regular” doctors wouldn’t.

Pumped up. As R. Alton Lee writes in his book The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley, the good doctor had no sooner set up his practice than a farmer asked for his help. He and his wife wanted more children, but he was having trouble making his contribution. "No pep. A flat tire," he euphemized. Brinkley mentioned that wouldn’t be a problem if he had a few goat gonads inside his own. A goat was procured and neutered, the operation was performed under cover of night, and the farmer reported that his "flat tire" was fixed. Brinkley had found his niche!

The same way Botox buzz spread among the L.A. ladies who lunch, the success of Brinkley's miracle operation soon brought him other customers. Most famously, Brinkley offered William Stittsworth and his wife a package deal: goat gonads for him, goat ovaries for her. "A year later the rejuvenated couple had a healthy baby boy, which they appropriately and proudly named Billy," Lee writes.

Soon Brinkley was charging $750 a pop for his "compound operation" and attracting customers like Harry Chandler, owner of the Los Angeles Times. And not only did it help impotence, Brinkley said, but it also treated ailments as varied as epilepsy and insanity. His batting average, he claimed modestly, was 90 percent to 95 percent. "How's that?" he asked.

Too bad there was no medical basis for the procedure, since any goat tissue, if it didn’t cause infection, wouldn’t be functional and would instead be absorbed by the patient’s body. It was testimony to the power of the placebo effect, and Brinkley knew it. In fact, he later admitted he merely tucked the testicles into the patient’s abdomen.

Not content with staying local, Brinkley built a radio station in Milford, broadcasting an odd mix of stories for kids, music, and medical advice—which often boiled down to exhortations that men who’d rather be stallions than geldings should "come to Milford for the Fountain of Youth!" He also sold mail-order prescriptions. He earned millions of dollars. Over the

A goat gonad transplant performed by Doc Brinkley (third from left) could run $750.
years, all of this attracted attention from competing interests: patent medicine companies angry at the competition, the AMA, and the Federal Radio Commission.

During the 1920s and 1930s Brinkley put up a good fight—producing happy customers, starting a radio station in Mexico after the FRC shut down KFKB, railing against the tyranny of the AMA, and moving to Texas to ply his rejuvenating treatments in new territory. He even ran for governor of Kansas three times (nearly winning once), hoping to stack the Kansas State medical board and get back his medical license, revoked in 1930. But by 1938, the tide was turning against him—a huge back tax bill from the Internal Revenue Service, malpractice suits from customers dissatisfied with his newer prostate operation, an indictment for mail fraud. In 1941 he declared bankruptcy and lost his Mexican radio station. He died the next year.

A quack, not a hack. Ironically, says Lee, Brinkley was a pretty skilled physician. Medical knowledge was spotty in those days, and he probably lost fewer patients than the average doctor of the time. "If he'd redirected his efforts into legitimate medicine, who knows what he could have done?"

Think quacks like Brinkley are a thing of the past? Robert Baratz, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, sees a growing number of popular products and practices without any scientific basis. "People want simple, quick answers to complex problems," he says. "And with the technology today, they get the idea we can do just about anything, like thawing out Ted Williams even though he's already dead."

Quacks in New York send at least eight people to the hospital after administering bogus Botox injections. As recently as five years ago, the Milford town clerk got the occasional call asking if Brinkley's clinic was still in business. And those who might have once sought out Brinkley can now buy herbal aphrodisiacs over the Internet.