



## OBSERVATIONS

## ETHICS MAN

# The drip, drip, drip of the profit motive

Doctors should stay clear of “wellness” ventures

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A few years ago I was instructed to advise a client on the lawfulness of people who weren't doctors practising hair transplant surgery. I discovered that there was no law prohibiting an unregistered, unlicensed, or unqualified person from practising most types of medicine.

This permissive legal landscape has contributed to the growth of aesthetic procedures performed by non-clinicians and a lucrative beauty and “wellness” sector.

Perhaps lured by the money, doctors are entering the scene and offering all sorts of treatments from Botox to penis fillers.

Get a Drip is one of several companies in the UK and the US that provide intravenous “wellness” drips, injections, and shots.<sup>1</sup> Its products have names such as “party drip” (£125), “slim drip” (£250), “anti-ageing drip” (£200), and “hair enhancement drip” (£200). It has a booth in the shopping mall close to where I live where customers can sit and be infused with a cocktail of vitamins and minerals.

Get a Drip's website features a page of frequently asked questions, where it states that its “team of healthcare professionals” is made up of GMC registered doctors, an advanced nurse practitioner, registered nurses, a nutritionist, paramedics, and a technician. It emphasises that it “does not diagnose, treat, prevent or cure any conditions” and that its “drips and boosters have no evidence to cure, prevent or treat cancer of any time or any other conditions.” It says that IV drip

hydration can benefit “anyone combating hangovers, feeling run down, tired, lacking energy or wanting to detox.”

Should doctors be involved in such ventures?

My worry is not so much that good evidence on the medical benefits of the IV drips is lacking, or that the price of the drips seem high relative to the cost of the contents, or even that clients may be misled into thinking that benefits exist.

I am prepared to accept that the drips may provide some benefit, subjective or otherwise, to some people, whether through the ingredients in the drip or the placebo effect. I am prepared to accept that the risks of adverse events are relatively low if the drips are administered safely and under medical supervision. I am prepared to accept that the price, though steep, may reflect the high costs of staff, rent, and other expenses and the need to make a profit. I am even willing to accept that customers can be appropriately informed about the uncertain benefits and real risks of harm and can autonomously consent to the interventions.

Yet, as an ethicist, I would advise doctors to stay clear. Why? Because it debases the role of the doctor and brings the profession into disrepute. How would a virtuous doctor feel when recommending, endorsing, administering, or overseeing a £200 “hair enhancement” drip, knowing that in all probability there will be no enhancement? Morally uncomfortable, I suggest, because he or she will have strayed too far from the Hippocratic arena in which doctors fight their battles against illness and suffering.

The temptation is strong for enterprising doctors to explore the fringes of medicine for gold, often in the fast growing wellness and aesthetic industries. That siren song must be resisted, for at stake are far greater riches: the reputation and moral integrity of the doctor and the very soul of the medical profession.

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1 Rimmer A. Sixty seconds on . . . vitamin drips. *BMJ* 2019;366:l4596. 10.1136/bmj.l4596 31285195

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