

## National Post

# Book Review: The Cure For Everything! by Timothy Caulfield

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***The Cure for Everything! Untangling the Twisted Messages About Health, Fitness and Happiness***

By Timothy Caulfield

Viking Canada

320 pp; \$32

Reviewed by Julia Belluz

To read Timothy Caulfield's *The Cure for Everything!* is to wonder how we are not all waddling around at 350 pounds, out-of-shape and sickly. Caulfield, an Edmonton-based health law professor, documents the alarming ways the simple truth about what makes us healthy is distorted by interest groups, from Big Food to Big Pharma, who unduly complicate our relationship with food and fitness.

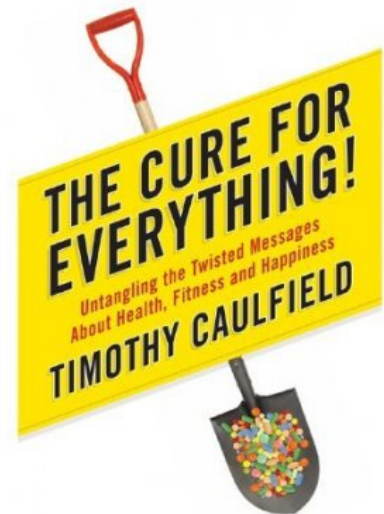
But Caulfield, the Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, is no scaremongering skeptic: His cure for the mess we're in is this lucid and well-researched compendium of the best-available science about diet, fitness, genetics, pharmaceuticals and alternative medicine. In other words, it's a kind of diet book for the evidence nerd.

On his "quest to find the truth about the things that make us healthy," the editor of the *Health Law Journal* lives his journey, seeking out a naturopath, consuming a mega-dose of homeopathic solution, going on a diet and getting his genes tested. In a chapter on fitness, Caulfield — a lifelong exercise nut — nearly expires after a workout with Hollywood trainer Gina Lombardi. Through the experience, we learn about what it takes to get the hard bodies we see onscreen. Of one nameless actress, Lombardi says the prescription is "two hours of intense, intense work — hard intervals plus weights — every day, seven days a week, all year. Plus, she doesn't eat." Other evidence-based truths about fitness: Working out by itself won't make you lose weight, there is no such thing as "toning" and the best exercise is a combination of intense resistance and interval training.

Furthermore, the calories in, calories out approach to slimming down — that we can burn off that extra pizza on the treadmill — is a myth perpetuated by industry. Why do you think Coca-Cola has been the lead sponsor of so many physical fitness initiatives? "While it is hard to knock Coca-Cola for promoting exercise, it is equally difficult to imagine that the company is not at least partly motivated by the financial upside of sustaining the exercise-as-a-weight-loss-strategy myth," Caulfield writes.

He also points his quack-busting finger at his peers in the academy. He tells of fitness researchers who want their work to be seen as "socially valuable" and, perhaps inadvertently, suppress the truth that diet is 80% to 90% of the weight-loss equation. On genetics, he shows that while the promises of the genetics revolution are overblown by media, much of the hype has been manufactured right in the ivory tower. One geneticist tells Caulfield, "The genetics community wants to make it look like we are on course to help with common diseases, even if we aren't." It's a fact some researchers don't want to escape, should the money go elsewhere. And much of the money backing genetics research can be traced back to one industry: Big Tobacco. (If we found the genetic on switch for lung cancer, whether we smoked might not matter.)

When Caulfield focuses his attention on food, he assembles a Food Advisory Team (FAT) made up of nutrition experts who guide his quest for the most healthful eating habits. Building on the foodie activist-journalist Michael Pollan's work, Caulfield uncovers the science behind the simple things that actually improve health: smaller portions, cutting out junk and doing so as part of a lifelong approach. It seems like stuff we already know. But not so fast: Caulfield is brilliant at describing how industry spins these simple truths. For example, we're bombarded with messages to eat more of many foods, but never less of anything, and the conventional



wisdom that everything in moderation is OK. This is all wrong, Caulfield contends. In the some 1,700-calorie a day diet most of us need to maintain a healthy weight, “there is no room for a *moderate* amount of crap.” (Italics are the reviewer’s own).

The health-care insider who can write like an outsider becomes a living example of his argument. Though he starts the book a fit man, the chocolate-coated peanut addict loses 25 pounds and nearly halves his body fat “all due to simple eating. Smaller portions. No poison. Healthier choices.”

In order to sustain weight loss and stop the number on the scale from creeping up as we age, Caulfield finds that we need to be ceaselessly vigilant. He speaks to one successful dieter who lost 75 pounds a decade ago and managed — against all odds — to keep it off. Her trick? She consumes only 1,600 calories each day by doing things such as only ordering starters at restaurants.

My first thought was “how depressing.” By the end of the book, I wondered whether that reaction has been shaped by the food peddlers who make us believe it’s depressing not to overindulge.

For those who follow matters of health evidence closely, some of Caulfield’s revelations may not be groundbreaking. Still, *A Cure for Everything!* is insightful and entertaining. If there are parts that are repetitive or gimmicky, it seems forgivable: The author is waging a noble battle against a mountain of misinformation. Gently and with humour, Caulfield guides readers through the funhouse world of health sciences with an openness and spirit of inquiry sometimes missing from the arsenal of eager myth-busters in the debunking genre, such as Ben Goldacre and his *Bad Science*. Next, though, we need to figure out how to fix the broken systems that generate the spin.

By the end of the book, Caulfield gets at the deep irony in the fact that we’ve never had so much scientific knowledge at our fingertips, yet “it is being subjected to an unprecedented number of perverting influences.” This geeky diet tome, then, becomes a compelling and timely argument for science and a reminder that science is an iterative process, breakthroughs are rare, and there are no magical cures for everything.

“*Science, when done properly, is worth defending,*” he writes. “And it’s worth defending because when it’s not twisted, it actually can make us healthier.”

• **Julia Belluz, associate editor of the *Medical Post*, writes the blog *Science-ish* ([macleans.ca/science-ish](http://macleans.ca/science-ish)).**

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