The Fraud Squad

Florida fairy lays trap for scam cures

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Bottled sea water cures AIDS!“ ”Electric shock wipes out parasites!“ Flimflam of this ilk inspired Pat Simmons, director of the Florida HIV/AIDS hotline in Tallahassee, to volunteer her website as the first National AIDS Health Fraud central last December. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which funds and runs the new national phone line, had been hunting for a home for it for years when good fairy Simmons materialized. She reported that Florida’s AIDS hotline had been fielding about 15 to 20 fraud-specific calls a year. ”We have enough fraud reported to us that we know that Florida has this problem,“ she said. ”This line will help discern the magnitude of the problem on a national level."

Currently, 19 states have their own AIDS health-fraud task forces, according to Simmons. The new hotline, based in Florida, is available to anyone in the United States, though individual state hotlines still report fraud to the FDA. Depending on the source of the scam, the FDA has the authority to confiscate bogus materials or report incidents to the Bureau of Consumer Affairs, which can shackle charlatans. As for the hawker with the miracle sea water? He was run out of the United States on a rail, but now peddles the stuff in the Caribbean. The FDA will determine this month whether to extend the national service. Simmons encourages people to call 888.332.1820 because, she said, “if you suspect something’s not right, it probably isn’t.”

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