

Guinea Pig

Have you ever been a guinea pig? I mean a real guinea pig (test subject) for the sake of medical science or consumer products? I have, several times.

Oatmeal was the signature product of The Quaker Oats Company of Chicago, the cereal that gave the company its name. (The company was bought by Pepsico in 2001.) But during the 1970's when I worked at the Research and Development Laboratories in Barrington, IL oatmeal was no longer the predominant product. Over the years Quaker had expanded into ready-to-eat cereals, waffles, pancakes, syrup, all sorts of corn products and even pizza. With the advent of the mergers and acquisitions frenzy, the company even bought the Magic Pan restaurant chain, Fisher Price toys, Brookstone catalog and men's clothing store Joseph A. Bank. But oatmeal was where the company got its start and the Quaker man logo with his wide brimmed hat appeared on food packages. It was time to revitalize the brand.

Oatmeal has long been known to have health benefits although it had not been quantified in a clinical test. I can provide my own anecdotal evidence. My father ate oatmeal almost every day and he lived past 89. My brother (made it to 83) and brother-in-law (going strong at 80) also consumed it regularly. (Oatmeal sold in the Philippines comes from Australia.) A team was assembled in the early 1970's to collect the data. A call went to ask for employee volunteers. Volunteers would consume an oatmeal based ready-to-eat cereal every single day and have their blood lipids monitored for several months. There was no extra compensation, except for the free cereal. (At the end of the test we each received a plaque.) Since we traveled on business, we would be taking the blank individual serving packages with us wherever we went. I remember walking into hotel restaurants we stayed in then ordering an empty bowl and milk for breakfast. Under no circumstances were we to leave the packages where it could get purloined. This went on for several months and the test confirmed the efficacy but apparently it was not enough to make a claim.

Dr. James W. Anderson, professor of medicine and clinical nutrition at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine devoted a lot of his work to the study of oatmeal's efficacy. It was his research that helped turn the corner. The key was consuming more, 100 grams per serving. Taking the more concentrated product called oat bran also resulted in more efficacy and products with oat bran proliferated starting around 1990.

It was not until 1997 that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the health claim for oatmeal. Today you will routinely see advertising that touts oatmeal. But do have your oatmeal; it is really good for you.

There was one test at Quaker that I was fortunate not to have been chosen. Quaker bought out a company owning the Gatorade sports drink. It was the first such drink and still dominates today under the management of Pepsi. There is even a tradition in sports today where Gatorade is poured on the coach after winning a championship. A test chamber was constructed, a room with controlled heat and humidity. In the center was a stationary bike where the subject pedaled under controlled conditions of temperature, humidity and difficulty. The idea was to run up your heart rate and make you sweat buckets. Then at the appropriate time, drink Gatorade or a placebo. This would determine the efficacy of the drink formulation, how fast you recover and replenish the electrolytes lost while sweating. There was only one problem – your “core” body temperature had to be monitored with a thermocouple. Attaching a thermometer to your skin or under your tongue wasn't good enough. The measurement had to be “internal.”

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Well, there is one orifice that is ideally suited for this. In effect, you would be exercising, huffing, puffing and sweating, all the time having this thermocouple in your orifice. I had volunteered but was disqualified as not being athletic enough. I jogged regularly then but they were looking for jocks. Thank goodness I wasn't jock enough. But I can think of a worse job – the researcher responsible for the thermocouples.

I was in the final phase of testing for cerivastatin, which like other statins was meant to treat high cholesterol, lower LDL and increase HDL. This was a product of Bayer. The test was conducted by Metabolic and Atherosclerosis Research Center, a clinic in Cincinnati that was engaged in independent testing of pharmaceuticals. The most "fun" part was a metabolic study where blood samples were taken hourly after a controlled meal. We had to stay overnight at the facility but how can you sleep with a catheter on your arm and a nurse waking you up hourly to draw blood? Cerivastatin was approved and sold under the name Baychol in the late 1990's. Unfortunately, there were some side effects and it was determined that the risk was greater than other statins already on the market. It was finally withdrawn in 2001. Thinking about it later on, I could have been one of those susceptible to side effects. There is always a risk of side effects with any medication.

The latest and last test that I was involved in was the most exhaustive. This test was for the prevention of prostate cancer. Some data indicated that vitamin E and selenium helped prevent prostate cancer. Called SELECT, the study was a very large scale involving 30,000 subjects in the U.S. and Canada. Somehow the organizers had gotten hold of a list of Procter & Gamble retirees and I received an invitation.

This was going to be a classical clinical test, double blind and with a placebo. In a double blind study, neither the subjects (like me) nor the administrator would know which was which. One of the benefits of this study was a "free" PSA and DRE. The PSA or prostate specific antigen was a blood test while DRE is digital rectal exam. We aren't going into the specific details of the DRE.

Unfortunately, after seven years on the test, the data indicated that the combination of vitamin E and selenium was not helping. In fact it might possible make it worse. That ended the testing.

I have come away from all this experience having a greater respect for food and pharmaceutical companies. They have to prove the efficacy of their products beyond doubt and evaluate side effects if any. Very few industries are held to such exacting standards.

At age 73, I'm not sure I would qualify for any clinical testing nor would I want to. But I'm still in a test monitoring for signs of dementia, an offshoot of the prostate testing. One of the regular "exams" consists of showing you four words, then distracting you by being made to count backwards and other tricks then at the end of the interview asked what those four words were. So far I've been able to recall but every time my interview approaches I get nervous.