



The Drug That Exposed the Underbelly of Cargo Cult Medicine

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Oct 22, 2025

Cargo Cult Medicine

Physicist **Richard Feynman** coined the term “*cargo cult science*” to describe people who **imitate the rituals of science without understanding its principles** — experiments done to look scientific, not to discover truth.

He borrowed the image from the South Pacific after World War II, where islanders had watched Allied planes land with food and supplies.

When the war ended and the planes stopped coming, they built **bamboo runways and wooden control towers**, believing that if they copied what they saw, the planes would return.

However, the planes never returned.

Modern medicine has built its own version of those bamboo airstrips. We follow the rituals of science — **mediocre studies, meta-analyses, guidelines, and “expert” panels** — but forget the *purpose* of science: to **think critically, to question, to challenge, to understand.**

What follows is an **autopsy of a profession that has forgotten how to think.**

Prologue

It started with a phone call.

“Doc,” my CEO said, “do you know this doctor?”

“Why?” I asked.

“He wrote a prescription for a drug that cost \$250,000 for one course.”

“You must mean \$25,000,” I said.

“No,” she replied. “The insurer already paid two hundred fifty thousand dollars.”

I assumed it had to be a miracle therapy — some one-in-a-million lifesaving treatment.

Then she told me the name: **Acthar Gel**.

I nearly fell out of my chair.

Acthar — **ACTH, adrenocorticotrophic hormone** — the same pituitary extract doctors used in the 1950s.

And yet here it was, sold as a “specialty biologic” for multiple-sclerosis relapses, lupus, and nephrotic syndrome — for a **quarter-million dollars** a course.

As I dug deeper — into its history, regulatory loopholes, and pricing gymnastics — I found something darker than corporate greed.

This was **legitimized corruption**: polished, credentialed, and woven into the fabric of modern medicine.

A rot so deep it would put a glioblastoma to shame.

Birth & Death of a Drug

Acthar (repository corticotropin injection — ACTH) was first approved by the **FDA in 1952**.

Back then, if a drug was safe, it was approved; **proof of efficacy wasn't required**.

(The 1962 **Kefauver-Harris Amendments** later demanded proof of effectiveness.)

Acthar Gel was a simple **pituitary extract suspended in gelatin** for slow release.

It was cheap, reasonably effective, and widely used through the 1950s–70s for MS relapses and inflammatory diseases.

By the early 1980s, **synthetic corticosteroids** — prednisone, methylprednisolone, dexamethasone — made ACTH obsolete.

By 1995, Acthar's rights landed with Rhône-Poulenc Rorer (later Sanofi-Aventis).

Demand had vanished.

In 2001, they sold it to a tiny biotech, **Questcor Pharmaceuticals**, for **\$100,000**.

At the time, a vial cost about **\$40**.

The Resurrection

Questcor discovered that Acthar's **1952 FDA approval was still valid** — **no new trials required**.

They didn't need to invest in science, safety, or efficacy — just marketing.

A few small, unblinded “open-label” studies followed — uncontrolled, self-funded, and published in **second-tier journals**.

A few dozen patients, a few glowing graphs, and suddenly Acthar was reborn as a “specialty biologic.”

The price exploded from **\$40 to \$34,000 per vial**.

Then came the masterstroke: the **biologic loophole**.

Because Acthar was an old, animal-derived extract rather than a modern synthetic molecule, Questcor could **classify it as a biologic** — shielding it from generic or biosimilar competition.

That regulatory label justified astronomical pricing under the pretense of complexity.

To seal the monopoly, Questcor **bought and buried Synacthen**, the only potential synthetic ACTH rival.

An obsolete hormone became a protected monopoly.

In 2014, **Mallinckrodt** bought Questcor for **\$5.6 billion**.

The **FTC** later fined Mallinckrodt **\$100 million** for antitrust violations, and the **DOJ** charged it with **kickbacks and Medicaid rebate fraud**.

Mallinckrodt filed for bankruptcy — twice — paid pennies on those penalties, and still sells Acthar at the same astronomical price.

Ironically, in 2021, **ANI Pharmaceuticals** re-launched a supposed competitor, *Purified Cortrophin Gel*.

In a normal market, prices would collapse — but here they didn't budge.

Both drugs remain stuck around **\$40,000 per vial**.

The World's Most Expensive Obsolete Drug

To grasp the absurdity, compare Acthar with true biologics.

Drugs like **Keytruda** revolutionized medicine — complex, engineered molecules that took years of research, billions in investment, and massive clinical trials.

A single dose of Keytruda — one of the world's most advanced cancer immunotherapies — costs about **\$10,000**.

Acthar, by contrast, is a **1950s pig-pituitary extract**.

No recombinant technology. No modern trials. No innovation.

Yet each vial sells for **\$30,000–\$40,000**, though it probably costs a few hundred dollars to make.

Why Doctors Prescribed It

ACTH and steroids both raise cortisol.

When IV Solu-Medrol became standard, there was **no rational reason** left to use ACTH.

Questcor recruited “**key opinion leaders**” with grants, speaking fees, and advisory roles.

Academic centers, hungry for industry funding, repeated the same slides written by corporate marketing teams.

Even respected journals published ghostwritten reviews that recycled the same unfounded claims.

Physicians — busy, trusting, and lulled by peer authority — **parroted rhetoric without asking if it made physiological sense.**

The result: a profession that recited data it never examined and prescribed drugs it didn't understand.

The shepherds were bought; the flock followed.

This wasn't ignorance — it was **intellectual surrender**.

The tragedy of Acthar isn't just corporate manipulation.

It's how willingly the medical profession became its amplifier.

When a profession stops reasoning, it doesn't just practice bad medicine

—

it practices **mindless medicine**.

Worse — it practices **soulless medicine**.

Where Is the Outrage?

This isn't just a pricing scandal — it's an indictment of everyone who looked away.

How did a 1950s pituitary extract become a \$40,000 “biologic,” and not one major institution slam the brakes?

Where were the neurologists, rheumatologists, and nephrologists who should have said:

“This makes no physiological sense. I will not prescribe this drug.”

Where were the academic leaders who claim to champion evidence-based medicine?

Where were the insurers, the regulators, the professional societies?

The silence — or rather, the **complicity** — is staggering.

Major MS centers and university hospitals knew, or should have known, that Acthar offers **no proven benefit** over cheap, high-dose steroids.

The data are public. The mechanism is obvious. The conclusion is unavoidable.

Yet industry money flowed — through “educational partnerships,” advisory boards, and research grants that shaped the opinions of **key opinion leaders**.

A handful of influential voices lent legitimacy just by standing on a podium.

That’s not medicine — that’s **moral sedation**.

If our most “elite” physicians can be convinced that a crude ACTH extract deserves to be the world’s most expensive biologic — can we still call them scientists?

And if they act knowingly for profit, or unknowingly out of intellectual surrender —

do they still belong to a profession that calls itself noble?

This isn’t gullibility.

It’s **decay — of mind and soul**.

When clinicians stop reasoning, they forfeit the right to call themselves scientists.

And if those entrusted to guard human health can't guard their own intellect,
they shouldn't be trusted with anyone's health.

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About the Author

Dr. Bharat Desai is a board-certified **internist and pulmonologist**, and founder of *Family Medical Doctors*, practicing in the **Tampa Bay area for over 40 years**.

His renewed passion after retirement is to **learn, teach, and spread a mindset of critical, biologically grounded medicine** — to restore medicine's lost art of thinking.

He urges physicians to **understand pathophysiology, think critically, respect the wonder of human biology, ask questions, and be bold enough to stand out** rather than parrot dogma.

Dr. Desai's essays expose how **money, ego, dogma, and institutional inertia** distort science — from Big Pharma and food lobbies to elite research centers, academic institutions, journals, and professional societies.

He believes in and advocates for a **grassroots revolution of thought — one doctor at a time**.

Challenge assumptions. Question experts. Reclaim your intellect.

If this resonates, share it with friends, family, and especially budding physicians.

Critique. Discuss. Comment. Subscribe.

That's how change starts — and how medicine can find its soul again.