



The Goat Gland Doctor: The Story of John R. Brinkley

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The remarkable events I'm going to chronicle here would likely never have unfolded, in 1917, if young Dr. John Brinkley had not been hired as house doctor at the Swift meatpacking company, located in Kansas. He was dazzled by the vigorous mating activities of the goats destined for the slaughterhouse. A couple of years later, after Brinkley had gone into private practice in Milford, Kansas, a farmer named Stittsworth came to see him. Stittsworth complained of a sagging libido. Recalling the goats' frantic antics, the doctor semi-jokingly told his patient that what he needed was some goat glands. Stittsworth quickly responded, "So, Doc, put 'em in. Transplant 'em."

Most doctors would have ignored the bizarre request, but Brinkley was not like most doctors. In fact, he wasn't a doctor at all. Although he had spent three years at Bennet Medical College in Chicago, he'd never graduated. He called himself a doctor on the basis of a \$500 diploma he had purchased from the Eclectic Medical University of Kansas City, Missouri. As absurd as it sounds, this piece of paper gave him the right to practice medicine in Arkansas, Kansas, and a few other states.

Buying a degree from a diploma mill was not out of character for Brinkley. He had worked as a snake-oil salesman in a road show, and then, with Chicago con man James Crawford, established Greenville Electro Medical Doctors. Under this name the pair injected people with colored distilled water for \$25 a shot. And that was big money in those days. Brinkley, therefore, had all he needed to capitalize on the farmer's idea of goat-gland transplants: he was unethical, he had a wobbly knowledge of medicine, and he had witnessed the rambunctious behavior of goats. And he possessed one more thing: knowledge of experiments carried out in Europe beginning in the late 1800s.

Charles-Edouard Brown-Sequard, a noted French physiologist, had shocked the medical community by injecting himself with the crushed testicles of young dogs and guinea pigs. Afterwards he claimed that he had regained the physical stamina and intellectual vigor of his youth. Many men availed themselves of La Méthode Sequardienne, but once the placebo effect was filtered out little remained. In Vienna physiologist Eugen Steinach proposed that youthful vitality could be restored by increasing levels of testosterone. The easiest way to do this, Steinach said, was through vasectomy. Sperm production wasted testosterone, and if the channel leading from the testes to the ejaculatory duct were tied off, then blood levels of testosterone would rise. Brinkley may also have heard of the work of Serge Voronoff, a French doctor who was stirring up a storm of controversy with his experimental gland transplants. Voronoff had been a physician in the court of the King of Egypt, and there he had spent a great deal of time treating the court eunuchs, who suffered from a variety of illnesses. He hypothesized that maintaining active genital glands was the secret to health. As proof, he cited his experiments with an aging ram into which he had transplanted the testicles of a young lamb. The ram's wool got thicker, and his sexual vigor returned. Voronoff then went on to transplant bits of monkey testes into aging men; he claimed success, although he could offer no scientific validation of his claim.

In America the stage was set for the meteoric rise of J.R. Brinkley.

Brinkley went to work, implanting a bit of goat gonad in Stittsworth's testicle. Within weeks the farmer was back to thank the doctor for giving him back his libido. And when his wife gave birth to a boy, whom they appropriately named Billy, Stittsworth spread the word about Brinkley. Soon Brinkley's business was booming. The testimonials poured in and so did the money. Brinkley was charging \$750 per transplant, and he couldn't keep up with the demand. All men needed the Brinkley operation, he declared, but the procedure was most suited to the intelligent and least suited to the "stupid type." This, of course, ensured that few of his patients would admit that they had not benefited from the operation.

There were a few problems. Like when Brinkley decided to use angora goat testicles instead of those from the more common Toggenberg goat. Recipients of the angora testicles were decidedly unhappy — Brinkley himself noted that they reeked like a steamy barn in midsummer. But Brinkley's major problem was that as his fame increased so did the criticism leveled against him by the medical community. Morris Fishbein, editor of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, called Brinkley a smooth-tongued charlatan and urged the authorities to revoke his right to practice. Brinkley's assertion that his procedure could cure conditions ranging from insanity and acne to influenza and high blood pressure amounted to quackery, Fishbein said. In response to this Brinkley called the American Medical Association a "meat-cutters union" and charged that its members were jealous of him because they were losing business. He then went to California and performed a transplant on Harry Chandler, the owner of *The Los Angeles Times*; the satisfied Chandler rewarded Brinkley with lots of free publicity.

In California Brinkley also learned about the potential of radio. Returning home, in 1923, he started up the radio station KFKB With 1,000 watts - an amazing number for the time - and broadcast music, his lectures on rejuvenation, political features, and the "Medical Question Box," during which Brinkley himself answered listeners' questions. It was perhaps radio's earliest advice show. But the advice Brinkley dispensed was ridiculous, and he usually gave listeners prescriptions to which he assigned a number. These they could fill at a local pharmacy; Brinkley had set up the National Dr. Brinkley Pharmaceutical Association in collusion with pharmacists who relished making lots of money selling water colored with indigo.

Kickbacks from this operation and revenues from the transplant surgeries made Brinkley an immensely wealthy man. For \$5,000, he would even implant genuine human glands, which he obtained from prisoners on death row. He had mansions, a fleet of Cadillacs, airplanes, and yachts. What he did not have was scientific respect. The American Medical Association finally prevailed upon the Kansas Board of Medical Registration to revoke Brinkley's license on the grounds of immorality and unprofessional conduct, and the Federal Radio Commission shut down KFKB for promoting fraud. Still Brinkley did not capitulate. He claimed he was being crucified by the authorities and kept his hospital going by hiring licensed physicians to work there. He also purchased radio station XERA in Mexico and began beaming his message into the United States with the power of one hundred thousand watts.

The "doctor" then decided that the only way to get his license back was to become governor. So in 1930 he organized a massive write-in campaign, and he almost won. By insisting that he was being persecuted by elitist doctors and politicians he won the support of ordinary citizens; and his promise to build free clinics and cure virtually all diseases boosted his appeal even further. But Brinkley couldn't even cure himself. The Milford Messiah — as he was sometimes called — the man who had performed over 16,000 goat testicle transplants, the man who appropriately wore a goatee all his life, developed a blood clot, and doctors had to amputate his leg. Till the very end, Brinkley's scheming mind remained

active. Confined to bed, he decided to study for the ministry and had visions of becoming a big-time preacher, He never made it. His last words were reported to have been, "If Dr. Fishbein goes to heaven, I want to go the other way." If there is any justice in the world, he did.

For Additional Information

- Lee RA. [The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley](#) (University Press of Kentucky, 2002) provides a fascinating account of Brinkley's life.

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This page was posted on April 17, 2002.

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