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BOOKS ON HEALTH

Sometimes, the Labels Lie

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ConsumerLab.com's Guide to Buying Vitamins & Supplements," edited by Tod Cooperman, William Obermeyer and Densie Webb. ConsumerLab.com, \$17.95.

As anyone who has spent time in Africa with the health professionals formerly known as witch doctors can attest, just because something is made from leaves or roots does not mean it is safe.

Mind-bending drugs and agony-inducing poisons can be made from ingredients that, under American law, can be labeled "all natural food supplement."

And, as anyone who has watched weeping athletes protest their innocence can attest, just because a supplement label says it does not contain amphetamines or steroids does not mean the label is accurate.

As top athletes have found out, after their medals have been taken away, some vitamin and supplement makers spike their products with extra, sometimes illegal feel-good ingredients to keep a hold on their customers.

Nostrums sold as "traditional Chinese medicines" have been found to contain Valium, mercury, codeine and testosterone.

Yet these products, often sold like medicine — sometimes by sales clerks whose pharmaceutical know-how consists of knowing how to work a cash register — are not tested by the Food and Drug Administration.

As long as the products stay on the far side of the vague line defining "medical claims," they remain food supplements. For example: "Lowers cholesterol" is a medical claim; "promotes cardiovascular health" is not. "Treats depression" is; "for emotional harmony" is not.

Under the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994, "food supplement" makers do not have to prove that their products work, or that they are safe. That's how products like ephedra end up on shelves and in magazine advertisements before it's discovered that they can kill people.

Prescription drug makers, by contrast, must spend millions on clinical trials and submit

the results to the F.D.A. before they ship their first pill or place their first advertisement.

In this largely unregulated arena, more than 1,000 companies make food supplements.

Standing guard over the bewildered consumer are not powerful government agencies but a few private labs. Consumer Reports magazine and the Good Housekeeping Institute occasionally test herbal products, and the United States Pharmacopeia, a nonprofit organization that sets standards for potency, plans to test products using its seal to make sure they meet its standards. For now, the best-known lab is probably Consumerlab.com, a private company founded in 1999 in White Plains.

This month it published its first guide, subtitled "What's really in the bottle?" It details its tests of 350 products, including vitamins, calcium, fish oils, ginkgo biloba, saw palmetto, creatine and ginseng.

Some results are quite disturbing.

For example, the lab reported on a 1999 test that found that 25 percent of the samples of ginkgo biloba lacked the correct amount of the active ingredient, which some claim improves memory, circulation and sexual function and alleviates depression, asthma and ringing in the ears.

In a follow-up, the lab found the situation worse: 75 percent of samples lacked enough of the ingredient.

Tests on 22 brands of ginseng products found only 9 that passed. Ten had pesticides banned for use on crops (2 of them at more than 20 times safe limits), 2 contained high levels of lead, and 7 had too little ginsenoside, the active ingredient.

The problems go on and on.

For those determined to take the supplements, the guide can be useful, though it tests only for the presence of ingredients. It does not check the grandiose health claims. That would require vastly expensive clinical trials, and because food cannot be patented and sold for many dollars per dose, supplement makers have little incentive to do trials.

Perhaps most disturbingly, for fear of lawsuits, the guide does not name the products that failed.

Dr. Cooperman said, however, that the lab had recently begun to post the names of failed products on its Web site, www.consumerlabs.com