When we think of a healthcare provider, the picture that most often comes to mind is of someone in a long white lab coat with a stethoscope slung around his or her neck. And we tend to accept much of what they tell us (although not as much as we used to) because we understand the extent of their education and experience. As my colleague Dr. Jamie Wells described it, a physician’s background includes “college, innumerable pre-med requirements, medical school, internship, residency and possibly specialty fellowship (sometimes more than one).”

However, Americans’ trust in the medical profession as a whole isn’t as great as it used to be — as depicted in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: “In 1966, nearly three fourths (73%) of Americans said they had great confidence in the leaders of the medical profession. In 2012, only 34% expressed this view. But simultaneously, trust in physicians’ integrity has remained high.”

But if that trust in physicians’ integrity is misplaced the results can have negative impacts on not just an individual but on large swaths of society. Think of the unvaccinated kids who have succumbed to measles or other diseases because their parents think vaccines cause autism.
And unfortunately, we have numerous examples of otherwise respected physicians who have stepped off the path of medical probity to gain attention, book deals, supplement promotions, and of course money. Examples abound: Andrew Wakefield (no longer a licensed physician) who originated the autism-vaccine link scam; Dr. Oz, who used to do cardiothoracic surgery, but now just does TV. And now we have ex-neurosurgeon Dr. Russell Blaylock, who started the health scare around monosodium glutamate or MSG. In a book he wrote in 1994, he called MSG an “excitotoxin” that could cause cancer, or at least headaches. Since then he’s promoted anti-vaccine, anti-GMO stances, warned about the presence of aluminum in cookware, and government “death panels”, decried the use of mercury-containing dental amalgam, and produced and sold subscriptions to his newsletter.

Blaylock targets Christians — he can invoke the authority of God in his promotion of quack herbal cures — as well as the elderly. Since older folks are more likely to develop cancer and Alzheimer’s disease, they are ripe for misinformation about brain health and non-chemo cancer “cures”.

What to do about these betrayers of the profession? Well, you can’t go after everyone — there are just too many. But you can be wary of the red flags that, according to Dr. Steven Barret’ quackwatch website, adorn many of such quacks’ sites and publications.

These are just the first 10:

1. When Talking about Nutrients, They Tell Only Part of the Story.
2. They Claim That Most Americans Are Poorly Nourished.
3. They Recommend “Nutrition Insurance” for Everyone.
4. They Say That Most Diseases Are Due to Faulty Diet and Can Be Treated with “Nutritional” Methods.
5. They Alleged Modern Processing Methods and Storage Remove all Nutritive Value from Our Food.
6. They Claim That Diet Is a Major Factor in Behavior.
7. They Claim That Fluoridation Is Dangerous.
8. They Claim That Soil Depletion and the Use of Pesticides and “Chemical” Fertilizers Result in Food That Is Less Safe and Less Nourishing.
9. They Claim You Are in Danger of Being “Poisoned” by Ordinary Food Additives and Preservatives.
10. They Charge That the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) Have Been Set Too Low.
To summarize: Although the MD degree is typically a sign of extensive education and probity, sometimes it just isn’t. When a physician, even one well-respected in his or her own field, starts promulgating new and intriguing theories in areas in which they have no training, do some background checking before you drink their particular brand of Kool-Aid.