

With Orrin Hatch Retiring, Alternative Medicine Is Losing Its Biggest Senate Supporter



By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 3, 2018



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Orrin Hatch, a Republican Senator from Utah, has announced his retirement. When he leaves, the Senate will lose its most ardent supporter of alternative medicine.

Previously, that title was held indisputably by Tom Harkin, a Democratic Senator from Iowa. He is largely to blame for the abomination known as the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), an organization so worthless that [it had to change its name](#) [2] so biomedical scientists would stop mocking it.

If Ted Kennedy was the Lion of the Senate, Sen. Harkin was the Snake Oil Salesman of the Senate. Given that his pet project wasted billions investigating pure pseudoscience, like magnet therapy, it's no surprise that NCCAM notched very few biomedical victories. That made Sen. Harkin upset because he had hoped that his faith in witchcraft would be vindicated. It was not, and when Sen. Harkin announced his retirement, Hank Campbell and I [wished him good riddance](#) [3].

Though Sen. Harkin is long gone, his devastating influence on public health lives on.

The Unregulated Supplements Industry

Dietary and other nutritional supplements are largely exempt from FDA oversight. This is due to a law passed by Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1994, the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). It was the brainchild of Sens. Harkin and Hatch -- the former a lover of woo and the latter a champion of the supplements industry -- and the NCCAM provided much of the "scientific" justification for the law.

Essentially, the [law](#) [4] declared vitamins, minerals, and even herbal "remedies" to be dietary

supplements. The effect of the law was to remove the pesky FDA from ensuring that the products are safe. As the [Mayo Clinic](#) [5] explains, "Regulations ensure that herbal supplements meet manufacturing standards but don't guarantee that they're safe or effective."

That's utterly insane, and the data support that conclusion. Every year, according to [Stat](#) [6], unregulated supplements send 23,000 Americans to the emergency room. The article says that patients showed up to the ER because of "cardiovascular symptoms, such as heart palpitations and chest pain; allergic reactions; choking; and difficulty swallowing."

If those symptoms occurred from a drug produced by Big Pharma, people would be marching with torches and pitchforks in the streets. But because these products are "natural," nobody cares. This irresponsible approach to supplements is a self-inflicted wound in our public health system.

Will Dietary Supplements Ever Be Regulated?

Unfortunately, even with Sen. Harkin gone and Sen. Hatch soon to be gone, alternative medicine remains alive and well in Congress. Democratic Representative Jared Polis and Republican Rep. Mike Coffman wish to form the [Integrative Health and Wellness Caucus](#) [7], which will promote the same quack medicine that Sens. Harkin and Hatch spent their careers advocating.

Alas, the [\\$37-billion dietary supplements industry](#) [8] likely will remain unregulated for the foreseeable future. The fight against junk science and bogus health must soldier on.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orrin_Hatch#/media/File:Orrin_Hatch,_official_portrait,_112th_Congress.jpg

[2] <https://www.aaas.org/blog/capitol-connection/will-name-change-make-nih-research-center-less-controversial>
[3]

https://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2013/01/31/science_says_good_riddance_sen_tom_harkin_106451.html

[4] https://ods.od.nih.gov/About/DSHEA_Wording.aspx

[5] <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/herbal-supplements/art-20046714>

[6] <https://www.statnews.com/2015/10/14/unregulated-supplements-send-thousands-to-hospital-each-year/>

[7] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/12/28/congress-forming-bipartisan-alternative-medicine-caucus-12337>

[8] <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/dietary-supplements-a-37-billion-a-year-boondoggle-2016-01-22>