blocked by plaque and then inflate the balloon to flatten and disperse the plaque. Angioplasty is a proven way to save the lives of patients who have just had a heart attack, and about a million were done in 2000. But more than two-thirds of the 828 angioplasties in Schneider’s study were performed on patients who had experienced no heart-attack symptoms. Instead, they simply showed signs of coronary arterial narrowing. In such cases, angioplasty has been moved back a step in the process, from treatment to prevention. Fine—except that the narrowing of coronary arteries is considered a poor indicator of future heart attacks, and the majority of the angioplasties performed in Schneider’s study afforded their patients no definitive benefit. In fact, in 14 percent of the cases, the invasive operations were completely inappropriate.

Prevention creep is hardly limited to angioplasties. Tests formerly given to patients with symptoms are now applied to healthy people as a preventive strategy. Newer, more powerful diagnostic tests and imaging technologies—such as prostate-specific antigen (PSA) testing to detect signs of prostate cancer in the blood and spiral CT scanners that search for tumors—present snapshots of what’s happening inside the body, turning up more and more potential health problems at earlier stages. “What we don’t always recognize, though,” says Schneider, “is that the overwhelming majority of what we see in these tests is benign, and will never develop into anything.”

The proliferation of medical tests generates more and more information, much of it ambiguous. But once something is known, doctors and patients often share an irresistible urge to do something about it: the cardiologist who sees narrowed arteries tends to reach for a prescription pad or a stent.

Invasive treatments are often performed inappropriately, because many tests, like the PSA, produce a plethora of false-positive results, suggesting cancer where there is none. Nonetheless, tests invariably lead to more tests—like biopsies—to ascertain whether the lump or mass noted on the scan is malignant. Frequently, this means surgery, adding an aspect of risk to what may be an otherwise meaningless pursuit. Prostate surgery, for example, often makes men impotent, continent, or both.

Some of these procedures work. Few would dismiss the efficacy of Pap smears or colonoscopies in the early detection of cervical or colon cancer. But many new procedures or tests, or even old procedures used in new ways, need a time lag to evaluate their usefulness. There isn’t any clear evidence, for example, that mammography or PSA screening has in fact reduced mortality from breast or prostate cancer. To help separate the known from the unknown, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force reviews all scientific evidence for or against the different preventative interventions and then grades them accordingly (www.ahcpr.gov/clinic/cpsix.htm).

“It is a difficult situation,” says Schneider. “Patients want relief from uncertainty, doctors want to offer them something, and these tests can provide a sense that more knowledge is possible. In the name of prevention, doctors and patients undertake a collaborative effort that sometimes leads to tests or procedures that might not be in the patient’s best interest.”

~Jerry Shine

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BURPING CASH

Tupperware®: The Movie

FILMMAKERS have so delighted in debunking the idyllic myth of 1950s America that exposing the era’s seamiest side has almost developed into its own genre. In movies such as Written on the Wind, Peyton Place, and Far from Heaven, what appears tranquil and familiar quietly seethes with scandal and intrigue. Now a new documentary, bereft of salaciousness but chock-full of drama, reveals the surprising truth behind a beloved 1950s trademark: Tupperware.

Using interviews with the first Tupperware Ladies, excerpts from company archives, and original promotional footage, Tupperware! demonstrates that the nifty plastic food-storage containers promised women much more than crisp lettuce and excuses to host parties. Despite its association with demure housewives and their casseroles, selling Tupperware enabled thousands of women, mainly from the working class, to earn an income and excel at something outside the domestic sphere.

“Tupperware offered opportunities women weren’t going to get working in...
factories, on the farm, or at the five-and-dime,” says the film’s director, producer, and writer, Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, who completed the documentary while a fellow at Harvard’s Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History. (Tupperware is scheduled to air on PBS’s American Experience in the spring of 2004.) “Women were able to put their kids through college and take vacations they’d never dreamed of,” she explains. And since they could schedule Tupperware parties—at the time, the product’s only permissible sales venue—around existing domestic responsibilities, women were able to continue their roles as homemakers while developing entrepreneurial skills.

Even more surprising than Tupperware’s role in empowering women was the woman in charge of its sales. Brownie Wise, an ambitious and savvy divorcée, devised and implemented the ingenious marketing and sales-incentive strategies that transformed the company from penny-ante to multimillion. In 1954, she became the first woman featured on the cover of Business Week. As Tupperware flourished, says Kahn-Leavitt, “everybody copied what Brownie did.”

But it wasn’t until Kahn-Leavitt, who produced the Emmy-winning film A Midwife’s Tale (based on the eponymous Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Phillips professor of early American history Laurel Thatcher Ulrich), plumbed the Smithsonian’s extensive archive of Tupperware records that she discovered the company’s dramatic history and colorful characters. Earl Silas Tupper—a grouchy Massachusetts tree surgeon-cum-inventor whose previous ideas included a fish-propelled boat—patented the plastic seal that keeps Tupperware airtight and emits the characteristic burping sound when closed. But it was Wise who convinced him to sell Tupperware exclusively at home parties, who readily assembled and motivated a sales force of thousands, and who was ultimately, and unceremoniously, fired after a series of vague disagreements and alleged improprieties.

Says Kahn-Leavitt, “This was a film waiting to be made.”

In an era when most women were in aprons, not offices, Wise’s contribution
to Tupperware’s success was astonishing—and, notes Kahn-Leavitt, is disparaged by the company to this day. (In a particularly vehement effort to denigrate Wise’s influence, the staff dug a pit behind Tupperware headquarters after she had left the company and buried all remaining copies of *Best Wishes*, her book of motivational speeches.)

A single mother who presided over staff meetings sporting such stylish accessories as mini-stiletto kitten heels and pearls, Brownie Wise was a figure other women could relate to and aspire to emulate. She understood that their considerable—and not necessarily unpleasant—domestic obligations didn’t prevent women from craving an identity and camaraderie outside the home. Selling Tupperware allowed them to be homemakers, working women, and ladies all at once. “Brownie was a pragmatist,” says Kahn-Leavitt. “Who else was going to give a job to a woman without a college education?”

Women drew on their existing networks of friends and family to participate in their home parties, and tailored their schedules to work as much, or as little, as they wished. One former Tupperware Lady, with a noticeable gleam in her eye, recalls hosting four parties a day. For women whose previous jobs were frequently dreary assignments at defense plants during World War II, selling Tupperware was sociable, enjoyable, and lucrative.

Nothing epitomized this experience more than the annual Jubilee, a baroque celebration at Tupperware’s headquarters in Kissimmee, Florida. Part family reunion and part pep rally, Jubilee drew exuberant Tupperware Ladies from around the country who dressed in costume (each Jubilee had a different theme culled from movies, television, and beauty pageants), played games (prizes included kitchen appliances and mink stoles), and honored each other as shrewd and effective businesswomen (top saleswomen were awarded Cadillacs and trips to Europe). “In a culture that rarely applauded the efforts of working-class women, the Tupperware Ladies were showered with praise and prizes,” says Kahn-Leavitt. “What else in their lives offered that?”

But despite the cars and furs, it seemed a sense of accomplishment mattered most. “It must seem kind of corny,” former Tupperware Lady Anna Tate says in the film. “But it was very important. [Tupperware] meant an awful lot to thousands and thousands of women who were able to go out and make a good living for themselves and their family. They never dreamed it would turn out this way.”

> ~Catherine Dufree

Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Archive Center, National Museum of American History, Brownie Wise Papers