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# Researchers give false legitimacy to alternative health products

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Over the past 20 years, a Norwegian researcher has been paid to study alternative health products. He nearly always finds that they are effective. We have gone through his research in detail.

The phrase “scientifically documented” in advertisements gives alternative health products a legitimacy they might not otherwise have.

Whether it’s weight-loss products such as “30 days” or “Coffee Slender”, wrinkle creams such as “Nourella” or “Skin gain”, or hair loss products such as “Nourkrin” and “Hair gain”, the imprimatur of scientific research provides some confidence that you will get what you paid for.

- Read the previous article from the investigation here: [Evidence is slim for Coffee Slender's claims](#) [6]

Yet when forskning.no journalists looked more carefully at the documentation behind some of these claims, they found reasons for concern.

The studies conducted by the researchers in support of these products lie in the grey area between research and marketing.

The researchers who have conducted the studies present themselves as having impressive academic titles and affiliations to research institutions that they do not actually have.

These researchers also have failed to disclose that the companies behind the products have paid for the research, or that they themselves may benefit financially from the sales of the products. The research also almost always concludes that the products work.

They conduct studies that may seem serious with legitimate scientific findings, yet under scrutiny, often fail to measure up. In one case, the study includes data tables that appear to have been copied from other studies. Still other studies claim that the research has been given ethical approval by public authorities, even though it has not.

## Dubious academic credentials

When forskning.no examined a dietary supplement called Coffee Slender produced by Immitec, based in Tonsberg, the name Erling Thom kept cropping up.

Thom is the scientist behind a series of studies on alternative health products, including several of Immitec’s brands. When the forskning.no journalists examined more of Thom’s studies, they found a number of other scientists who were also frequently involved in the research projects. Grethe Støa Birketvedt, a Norwegian, and Jan Wadstein, a Swede, were among Thom’s most frequent collaborators.

All three have impressive academic titles, but their CVs are questionable.

Thom identifies himself in many studies as having a PhD, and in cases where he is presented as an expert, he is presented as having a doctorate from Stanford, a highly respected American university.

forskning.no contacted Stanford for confirmation that Erling Thom had been awarded his doctorate by the university, but university officials could find no record of Thom at all.

There is a record of Thom having taken written a thesis at a second-degree level at the University of Oslo in chemistry, but no record of a doctoral degree.

In a video on the Coffee Slender website, Thom introduces himself as a doctor and researcher. The video makes it easy to believe that he is a medical doctor. Thom's CV from a 2005 conference on ageing also states that he studied medicine. But the forskning.no journalists could find no evidence that Thom is a medical doctor.

Nor were the journalists able to get an explanation about this from Thom. He has been presented with everything described in this article, but due to illness he did not want to comment on the specifics.

Other media have looked at Birketvedt and Wadstein's credentials and found similar problems. In 2008, VG, a Norwegian national newspaper, found that Birketvedt had claimed to have an honorary doctorate from a Swiss university that does not exist. Birketvedt told the newspaper she may have been duped by the fake university.

VG also looked into Wadstein's credentials in 2014 and found that although he claimed to be a professor at Lund University in Sweden, he had not been associated with the university for many years.

#### **Colds, flu, obesity, wrinkles, hair loss and sex drive**

Thom has published study results for at least three different cold and flu remedies, six obesity products, three wrinkle treatments, two hair loss products and one to boost sex drive. This is just a selection of studies examined by forskning.no.

Over the last decade Thom has been an independent researcher, but previously he was associated with a large company called Parexel, which conducts commissioned research under contract. But he has also been an inventor and applied for patents.

When the forskning.no journalists reviewed Thom's research on health products, they found that collaborated with either Birketvedt or Wadstein in just under half of his health-related studies.

#### **Suspicious similarities**

The forskning.no review found that Thom's studies of different products had a surprising number of similarities.

He almost always finds that the products work well, and he often recommends the substance or product. He rarely finds side effects. His studies are usually quite short term, no more than a few months at longest, and almost always involve just a few patients or study subjects.

The findings themselves are often based on simple measurements, such as skin thickness or weight, or the patient's own subjective assessment. Blood tests or other more quantitative assessments are rarely included in the studies.



category. Nor is the journal registered in PubMed—the world's largest database of medical research. Other journals that published Thom's work were similarly poorly ranked.

### **Conflict of interest**

In one of the most recent articles by Thom and Birketvedt, the researchers describe two individual patients who have lost a great deal of weight through sound dietary advice, monitoring and the use of a diet pill.

This diet pill has exactly the same ingredients as a substance that Birketvedt patented in 2009.

However, the article does not describe this potential conflict of interest.

This was a recurring problem in many of the studies that were reviewed by the forskning.no journalists. Almost none of the articles contained any information about who paid for the study, or if any of the researchers have any financial interests related to the product being studied.

Many journals ask researchers to fill in a special form prepared by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. The form asks researchers to disclose who paid for the study and any financial or personal interest they might have in the research results.

But most of Thom's studies reviewed by forskning.no did not include this information.

"It's quite bad that he has failed to state any potential conflicts of interest," Hjelmesæth said.

### **Marketing products with minimal effect**

The forskning.no journalists also documented cases where Thom and his colleagues were involved in marketing the very products they had studied, and that they stood to gain from financially.

These are products that consumers pay good money for in the belief that they will be effective, even though it is likely that the actual effects are minimal, the journalists concluded.

### **Erling Thoms published studies on alternative health products:**

- [Skin treatment with two different galenical formulations of retinyl palmitate in humans](#) [7], 1993.
- [Long-term effects after topical application of active retinyl palmitate](#) [8], 1994.
- [A controlled clinical study of Kanjang mixture in the treatment of uncomplicated upper respiratory tract infection](#) [9]s, 1997.
- [A comparative double-blind within subject study of the efficacy and tolerability of two different derivatives of vitamin a on skin thickness and elasticity: retinoic acid and conjugate retinyl palmitate](#) [10], 1997.
- [Sexual Desire in Men: Effects of Oral Ingestion of a Product Derived from Fertilized Eggs](#) [11], 1997.
- [A comparative double-blind vehicle controlled within subject study of the efficacy and tolerability of a topical treatment of fat deposits and cellulitis on the thighs](#) [12], 1998.
- [A randomised placebo controlled double-blind parallel group study in the treatment of aging symptoms of the skin](#) [13], 1999.
- [Combination of diet, exercise and intermittent treatment of cimetidine on body weight and maintenance of weight loss. A 42 months follow-up study](#) [14], 2000.
- [A randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of a new weight-reducing agent of natural origin](#) [15], 2000.
- [Conjugated Linoleic Acid Reduces Body Fat Mass in Overweight and Obese Humans](#) [16], 2000.
- [Conjugated Linoleic Acid Reduces Body Fat in Healthy Exercising Humans](#) [17], 2001.

- [Efficacy and tolerability of Hairgain in individuals with hair loss: a placebo-controlled, double-blind study](#) [18], 2001.
- [The effect of a new skin ointment on skin thickness and elasticity](#) [19], 2001.
- [Chitosan Conjugated CLA Gel For Treatment of Stable Chronic Psoriasis Vulgaris](#) [20], 2002.
- [Har r amelkstabletter symptomatisk effekt p  vondt i halsen?](#) [21] 2004.
- [Randomized Study of the Efficacy and Safety of Oral Elderberry Extract in the Treatment of Influenza A and B Virus Infections](#) [22], 2004.
- [Experiences with three different fiber supplements in weight reduction](#) [23], 2005.
- [A Randomized, Double-blind, Placebocontrolled Study on the Clinical Efficacy of Oral Treatment with DermaVite™ on Ageing Symptoms of the Skin](#) [24], 2005.
- [Nourkrin®: Objective and Subjective Effects and Tolerability in Persons with Hair Loss](#) [25], 2006.
- [The effect of chlorogenic acid enriched coffee on glucose absorption in healthy volunteers and its effect on body mass when used long-term in overweight and obese people](#) [26], 2007.
- [The Effect of A Novel Food Supplement Containing a Mixture of Water Extracted Herbs and 1.3-1.6-Beta-Glucan on Body Composition and Weight in Females. The results from a randomized placebo-controlled double-blind study in female subjects](#) [27], 2010.
- [A Randomised, Placebo-Controlled Doubleblind Parallel Group Study in the treatment of aging symptoms of the skin using topical and oral treatments](#) [28], 2012.
- [Cosmetic Hair Treatments Improve Quality of Life in Women with Female Pattern Hair Loss](#) [29], 2013.
- [Treatment of hair thinning and hair aging with specific lectican and leucine proteoglycans](#) [30], 2014.
- [A case study: Obesity and the metabolic syndrome. A threepronged program, targeting education, close follow-up and a dietary supplement, significantly decrease body weight and body fat](#) [31], 2016.
- [A Dietary Supplement in Combination with an Education Plan and a LongTerm Follow-up Significantly Decrease Blood Pressure, Body Weight and Body Fat](#) [32], 2016.
- [Topical treatment of psoriasis with an ointment containing liver oil from ratfish \(Chimerra Monstrosa\). A pilot study](#) [33], 2016.
- [Stress and the Hair Growth Cycle: Cortisol-Induced Hair Growth Disruption](#) [34], 2016.

*This article is based on an investigation by journalists at [www.forskning.no](http://www.forskning.no). [You can read the Norwegian version of the article here](#)[35].*

-  [Screenshot from YouTube: Erling Thom promoting a product called HarVokse, designed to improve hair growth. \(Photo: \(Video owned by HarVokseClinic.com.\)\)](#) [36]
  -  [Screenshot from YouTube: Jan Wadstein promotes Tonalin CLA, a diet pill. \(Facsimile from YouTube\)](#) [37]
  -  [Screenshots from the Nourkrin website, which is a hair-growth product and one of the substances that Thom has studied. Here Thom promises scientifically proven efficacy. \(Screenshot from the Pharma Medico website\)](#) [38]
  -  [thom\\_harvokse.jpg](#) [39]

Fact box

#### **Products Erling Thom has studied, where the articles are available:**

- Kanjang Mixture, Curamed and Sambukol flu and cold remedies.
  - Sincera, Cimetidine, Tonalin CLA, CoffeeSlender, 30 days and Scuo-bloc, products for obesity.
  - Skingain, Dermavite and Nourella, against aging skin.
  - Hairgain and Nourkin against hairloss.
  - Libido for lacking sex drive.
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[Evidence is slim for Coffee Slender?'s claims](#) [6] [Researchers who endorse miracle cures](#) [40]

[Nancy Bazilchuk](#) [41] [based on an article by Ingrid Spilde and Nina Kristiansen](#) [42]

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[6] <http://sciencenordic.com/evidence-slim-coffee-slender%E2%80%99s-claims>

[7] <http://www.iscd.it/files/SKIN-TREATMENT-WITH-TWO-DIFFERENT-GALENICAL-FORMULATIONS-OF-RETINYL-PALMITATE-IN-HUMANS.pdf>

[8] <http://www.iscd.it/files/LONG-TERM-EFFECTS-AFTER-TOPICAL-APPLICATION-OF-ACTIVE-RETINYL-PALMITATE.pdf>

[9] <http://www.medref.se/pdf/thom2.pdfS/abstract>

[10] <http://www.iscd.it/files/A-COMPARATIVE-DOUBLE-BLIND-WITHIN-SUBJECT-STUDY-OF-THE-EFFICACY-AND-TOLERABILITY-OF-TWO-DIFFERENT-DERIVATIVES-OF-VITAMIN-A-ON-SKIN-THICKNESS-AND-ELASTICITY.pdf>

[11] <http://imr.sagepub.com/content/25/2/62.full.pdf>

[12] <http://www.iscd.it/1998---vol.-16--.html>

[13] <http://www.iscd.it/files/A-RANDOMISED-PLACEBO-CONTROLLED-DOUBLE-BLIND-PARALLEL-GROUP-STUDY-IN-THE-TREATMENT-OF-AGING-SYMPTOMS-OF-THE-SKIN.pdf>

[14] <http://www.medscimonit.com/download/index/idArt/508165>

[15] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11092233>

[16] <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/130/12/2943.long>

[17]

<http://level1diagnostics.com/research/C/Conjugated%20Linoleic%20Acid%20Reduces%20Body%20Fat%20In%20>

[18]

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/12056799\\_Efficacy\\_and\\_tolerability\\_of\\_Hairgain\\_in\\_individuals\\_with\\_a\\_controlled\\_double-blind\\_study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/12056799_Efficacy_and_tolerability_of_Hairgain_in_individuals_with_a_controlled_double-blind_study)

[19] <http://www.iscd.it/files/THE-EFFECT-OF-A-NEW-SKIN-OINTMENT-ON-SKIN-THICKNESS-AND-ELASTICITY.pdf>

[20] <http://www.iscd.it/files/Chitosan-Conjugated-CLA-Gel-For-Treatment-of-Stable-Chronic-Psoriasis-Vulgaris.pdf>

[21] <http://tidsskriftet.no/article/1116687/>

[22] <http://imr.sagepub.com/content/32/2/132.long>

[23] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15614200>

[24] <http://imr.sagepub.com/content/33/3/267.full.pdf>

[25] <http://imr.sagepub.com/content/34/5/514.long>

[26] <http://imr.sagepub.com/content/35/6/900.long>

[27] [\[eq.com/sites/default/files/presentation/30%20days%20presentasjonsposter%20fra%20International%20Congress%20\]\(http://www.med-eq.com/sites/default/files/presentation/30%20days%20presentasjonsposter%20fra%20International%20Congress%20\)](http://www.med-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

[28] <http://www.iscd.it/files/A-randomized,-placebo-controlled-double-blind-parallel-group-study-in-the-Treatment-of-Aging-Symptoms-of-the-skin-using-Topical-and-Oral-Treatments.pdf>

[29] <http://www.iscd.it/files/Cosmetic-Hair-Treatments-Improve-Quality-of-Life-in-Women-with-Female-Pattern-Hair-Loss.pdf>

- [30] [http://static7.enetural.com/static/journal\\_of\\_applied\\_cosmetology1\\_26791.pdf](http://static7.enetural.com/static/journal_of_applied_cosmetology1_26791.pdf)
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- [32] <http://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/a-dietary-supplement-in-combination-with-an-education-plan-and-a-longterm-followup-significantly-decrease-blood-pressure-body-weig-2155-9600-1000512.pdf>
- [33] [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299843278\\_Topical\\_treatment\\_of\\_psoriasis\\_with\\_an\\_oinment\\_containing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299843278_Topical_treatment_of_psoriasis_with_an_oinment_containing)
- [34] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27538002>
- [35] <http://forskning.no/2016-09/erling-thom-faar-coffee-slender-potenspiller-til-aa-fungere>
- [36] [http://sciencenordic.com/sites/default/files/thom\\_harvokse\\_0.jpg](http://sciencenordic.com/sites/default/files/thom_harvokse_0.jpg)
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