



Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 104: Barbara Dace

Transcript

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Our guest this week is Dr. Barbara Dace. Barbara has been a compounding pharmacist for 32 years, creating custom medications, educating pharmacy students as well as the public, and improving health and quality of life for hundreds of patients. She loves to sing and play the autoharp, and has become an award-winning songwriter.

Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, Editor-in-Chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at Cool-Tools.org. I'm joined by my co-host, Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Our guest this week is Dr. Barbara Dace. Barbara has been a compounding pharmacist for 32 years, creating custom medications, educating pharmacy students as well as the public, and improving health and quality of life for hundreds of patients. She loves to sing and play the autoharp, and has become an award-winning songwriter. She's also one of our favorite and most frequent contributors to Cool Tools, where she writes really great reviews of lots of different tools. And so we invited her on the show because we knew she would be an interesting person to talk to. How's it going, Barbara?

Barbara: Oh, it's going great, and it's so wonderful to talk to you guys after all this time. I've been ... Kevin Kelly, I was a subscriber of CoEvolution Quarterly and all that back in the day.

Kevin: Wow.

Barbara: And then, Mark, thank you for inventing Maker Faire. It's one of my favorite places to be in the world, so, yeah, really pleased.

Mark: That's cool. I can't quite take credit for Maker Faire, but I'm affiliated with those folks, so thank you.

Barbara: Well, but you ... I don't think there'd be a Maker Faire if there weren't a Make Magazine, and that was you, so.

Kevin: Well, it's really great to connect with you. We don't have as much connection with our readers as we would like, and so it's really a pleasure to have somebody who has been following us. Thank you.

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. So, this is a good pick. I don't think we've ever had anyone talk about this before, but one of the tools you wanted to talk about is Consumer Reports. Tell us about it and why you like it.

Barbara: Yeah, well, I grew up with Consumer Reports, and I thought everybody would refer to Consumer Reports before they made any big purchase, and then as an adult I was like, "Oh, God, no. Really, they don't?" So Consumer Reports has been around for like 80 years. They've never accepted advertising, and what they do is they're an independent, nonprofit organization, and they test and rate and compare all kinds of products. So they do cars, they do chocolate, they do ketchup, they do anything. They rate health insurances, all kinds of things. So because they don't accept any advertising, you don't have to worry about them being influenced thereby.

And they've been really instrumental in fighting for improved national policies. They were big on the getting seat belts being required, all sorts of other ... baby carriers, and just all kinds of safety issues. They've been right in there fighting for consumer rights the whole time.

So it's just a really good resource, particularly when you're making a big purchase, but also when you're making a small one, because, you know, [inaudible 00:03:24], well, let's see, what is the best kind of chocolate or whatever? And some things are ... They're as objective as they can possibly be, but you can't help it sometimes. But they do their best to be objective, and they have a legion of grim engineers figuring out these tests that they do for all sorts of products. So it's a really good resource, and at the same time you're also supporting a advocacy group that's helping make the world a better place for people that buy things, which is pretty much everybody.

Kevin: So, yeah, and they have a subscription fee. It's a subscription paper magazine, and [inaudible 00:04:17] there's an online version. For many years, before the internet came along, I would go to the library. Most libraries would subscribe to it, so you could ...

Barbara: Exactly, yeah.

Kevin: You could use it there. My understanding is also not that they also do not accept advertising but they also purchase all the things that they test themselves. They don't accept gifts or, you know ...

Barbara: Yeah, so unlike a lot of ... I was reading about people that review mattresses online, and it's like, "Well, they get free mattresses. That might influence them just a little bit." But they actually just go out incognito, buy a car or whatever it may be, and just test the snot out of it. And they were, for instance, back when Suzuki Samurais. They were the ones that found out that they roll over real easy, and Suzuki sued them, and they lost. There's been a number of cases like that.

Kevin: So, the one thing, though, [inaudible 00:05:17] reasons why I kind of never subscribed to it myself was I, for some reason and maybe you can kind of counter this, is that I often found that the selection of the ones that they were testing was sort of a very ... seemed a very narrow set for whatever criteria they were looking at and that some of the most interesting or the better bargains or whatever weren't even in the list of things that they were considering. If it was vacuum cleaners or whatever, and maybe they were doing it but they had missed the Dysons completely when they first came out. So do you ... Is that a correct impression, or am I misremembering or is that just [crosstalk 00:05:59]?

Barbara: No, that's ... Yeah, I mean, they can't buy every vacuum cleaner on the planet, but they try to get a good selection. Yes, they are going to miss some. And the other caveat I have is that very often the ratings will come out, say, dishwashers. A few years back I was looking for a dishwasher. Well, by the time I was looking for a dishwasher, all of the models that they had reviewed were no longer for sale, so sometimes what you have to do is just kind of go, "Okay, well what was the model that descended from that?"

And you also ... They can also give you a good idea as to whether they ... For instance, they rate the general reliability of a particular brand, so you can look and say, "Well, how's Whirlpool compared to Amana on refrigerator reliability?" And they'll tell you. That won't necessarily tell you whether that one particular model was perfect, but it at least gives you an idea. And it gives you something to work from. But, yeah, they're not gonna have every single thing ever. It's like whenever they test foods, of course they leave out Trader Joe's, and I'm like, "Well, hey, that's half of what I buy."

Kevin: Right.

Barbara: So ...

Kevin: Yeah, no, the currency was an issue as well in that sort of unlike the Wirecutter, which assigns someone to a beat and they do updates every couple of months. So I think it's kind of, as you said, a good place to start to see what models or what

brands are regarded in that space, and then you can go online to maybe get something more current.

Barbara: Yes, and they do have an online subscription as well. I actually get both. I find the magazine is good for sort of introducing me to things that I didn't know that I needed to know about, and online is good for when I go, "I want to look up this." So I actually get both, and they're not that ... I'm pretty cheap, but their subscriptions are not that expensive, so.

Mark: I also heard something interesting about Consumer Reports where they don't allow product manufacturers to say that they were highly rated on Consumer Reports. Like if you say, "Rated Number One on Consumer Reports," they'll actually go after you.

Kevin: Right.

Mark: That's interesting.

Barbara: Mm-hmm (affirmative). They sure will.

Mark: I didn't know they could actually do that.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah, I think that, again, to protect their brand. It's they don't want to be seen as endorsing anything ...

Mark: Right.

Barbara: Precisely.

Kevin: ... and so that gives them all the more objectivity.

Mark: That's cool.

Barbara: Yeah.

Mark: That's cool. So, Barbara, tell us about the next tool on your list.

Barbara: Okay. Well, I am a compounding pharmacist, and most people don't even know what that is or what a compounding pharmacy does. Basically we make custom medications that are not available from mass-manufactured sources, and there are ... Well, 95 or 99% of the time, medications from mass-manufactured sources will be perfectly good for whatever most people need, but there's no one shoe that fits all feet, and every so often you're gonna run across a situation where this just isn't going to work.

So for instance, a baby needs a heart medication that only comes in a tablet. Well, that's not gonna work too well. You have a cat that every time you try to give it

some medicine it tries to rip your arm off. Things that are ... There's a number of ones that used to be commercially available but either were not in the sort of dose that the prescriber is wanting in this situation or that simply became not economically feasible for companies to keep making. Basically the demand went down so low that they just gave up.

Other ideas are like pain creams. So for instance, if you have a bad knee and they want you to take an anti-inflammatory for it, but the anti-inflammatory tears up your stomach. Well, you can put most of those anti-inflammatories in a transdermal cream, rub it on your knee, and now you're only medicating your knee as opposed to having to medicate your entire body in order to reach your knee. You can even put in more powerful pain relievers, even narcotics and things like muscle relaxants, things for nerve pain. So there's all sort of things that you can put and you can combine them, so you don't even have to use one medication but several of them that then the patient can just apply to the area that's the problem and not have to affect their brain or gut or anything else that isn't involved, but just putting it right there. Now, of course, to some extent it will be systemic. You will still absorb it systemically, but you're not gonna have nearly as high a level of side effects as you would if you had to get your entire body to tissue level before you affected the tissue that you wanted to affect.

So another thing we do a lot of is bioidentical hormone therapy, which is simply using the same hormones that are actually missing from the body, chemically identical. And in a number of situations, these are not available commercially. Some of them are. So for instance, Estradiol patches. Those are bioidentical. Progesterone capsules. Those are bioidentical. But if somebody ... If a woman, for instance ... We also use testosterone in our bodies, we just don't use as much, so if you want to get a female-sized dose of testosterone you tend to really have to compound it, because all that's available commercially is guy doses. Let's see ...

Kevin: So presumably there is a listing of somewhere where you could go to find out where your nearest compounding pharmacist was. How do they generally charge? What's the ... Do they just sort of set their own prices for it? Is it like a surcharge? What's happening there? What's the economics?

Barbara: It's pretty much individual for each compounding pharmacy, and you can certainly call them and ask them what their price for a particular compound would be before you settle on getting it at a particular pharmacy. But, yeah, another thing that affects the price is whether the pharmacy is already making something like that. For instance, we do a lot of low-dose naltrexone. So I've been told that our prices are pretty darn reasonable on low-dose naltrexone, but if you called a pharmacy that had never made it before, well, they have to go out and buy it from scratch and all this sort of stuff, and it's a lot more expensive that way. So occasionally I've referred patients as like, "You know, I could make that for you, but I know this other pharmacy that actually kind of specializes in it and they would probably be less expensive, probably be able to get it sooner, so maybe you might want to go over there."

And then you were mentioning how to find another compounding pharmacy. One easy way is to call even your regular pharmacy and just say, "Look, if you got a compound, where would you send it?" 'Cause most pharmacies know where they want to send their compounds. You call a Rite Aid or a Walgreens, they generally do not want to do compounds. They're time-consuming and can be difficult, so they generally refer it out to somewhere else.

Kevin: Is there an online source? Can you search online and find legitimate compounding pharmacies online for a particular drug, or is this only something that you would do ... I don't know how you do it otherwise.

Barbara: Oh, no, yeah, certainly. The International Academy of Compounding Pharmacists has a search function, and that's one of the things I included in my little thing that I think that you're gonna print.

Mark: Oh, the show notes. Yeah, we'll put that in.

Barbara: Yeah, if you go ... So if you go to ... It's www.iacprx.org, and if you go there one of the things they ... one of the buttons they have is "Search for a compounding pharmacy." And as I remember, you just put in your ZIP code or your city name, and it's going to bring up compounding pharmacies in your area.

Kevin: What I meant was can you put in something that you're looking for and it will show you where you can buy it online?

Barbara: Oh, I see. Can you put in "low-dose naltrexone, where can I find it?"

Kevin: Right, and then it'll give you your place 'cause you have the best rates, and so you would just, you'd buy it there even though you live in New York City.

Barbara: Yeah, not so much, not so far. I think that low-dose naltrex ... There's a LowDoseNaltrexone.org or something like that, and I believe they list some of the pharmacies that make it, but that's not ... You don't generally see that a whole lot. Although if you try doing a search for just what you're interested in and "compounding pharmacy" and the name of your town, it might possibly show up, but part of the limitation on that is that FDA doesn't allow us to go around waving a flag and saying, "Hey, buy your whatever compound here." There are limitations in what we can discuss. There are certainly major limitations on ... I'm not allowed to say you can use this for that, because that's something that you're only legally allowed to do once the FDA has a new drug application, which is a thing that costs millions of dollars and tons of studies and all that sort of stuff, and that is not going to happen with a one-off compound.

Mark: Right. Barbara, I have a question about compounding pharmacies. So this ... Everything that is made at a compounding pharmacy requires a prescription, so you are going to have to work with your doctor to be able to get what you need, right?

Barbara: In California, that is the case. In some states, that is not the case.

Mark: Oh, wow.

Barbara: In some states, as long as the compound that you're making ... For instance, we make one that the original owner of the pharmacy formulated that all of the ingredients that go into it do not require a prescription, and it used to be the case that you could sell that over the counter without prescription. And in some states that still is the case, but State Board of California has decided, pretty reasonably, if you're going to step out of the norm and do compounding, they want a prescription for it whether or not any of the ingredients actually requires a prescription. So for instance, we make boric acid capsules that are actually used as suppositories, but we can't sell those over the counter. We could sell the boric acid over the counter, but not the capsule.

Kevin: You do compounding with cannabis at this point in California?

Barbara: Some places might. We don't. My boss has actually looked into it. So far what he's seeing, at least in our area, is that they are making it very difficult for ... I think he's kind of decided it would be too much of a problem for us. So although it would make a lot of sense because ... Some of what I hear about the cannabis dispensaries as a pharmacist makes me kind of nervous. I wish that things were a little more controlled and a little more careful, and as pharmacies we know how to do that. But, yeah, not so far. Not at this point.

Kevin: Okay.

Mark: Okay. So, let's see. The next tool that would like to talk to is something that's been around for a long time, and I honestly didn't know that they were still around: the Motley Fool website.

Barbara: Yeah, so ... I mean, I'm not saying this is the absolute best financial website out there. I'm just saying that it's one of the ones that doesn't put me to sleep when I try to read about financial and investment subjects. So I find it helpful just because some of those places I go to it's like, "Oh my God, it's like I'm back in pharmacy school. Ugh, I'm gonna fall asleep." They have a certain amount of enthusiasm and humor that they bring to the subject that just seems to keep my interest a little better and help me get through the information. And they are, of course, they are a website that is trying to make money, so the moment you sign on there — which is free — they will start sending you solicitations for, hey, join this newsletter or that newsletter that costs this much or that much. You can, however, ignore all that and just go to the forums that are free and open, and the website has tons of information. There's so many people that aren't investing at all, in part because they're intimidated. They just don't know what kind of choices to make, and this can help you get started, even if where you're starting from is just trying to do some debt reduction.

But it's ... All your life you're going to be involved with money, and burying your head in the sand and ignoring it is not a good way to go. So, obviously there are people that can't afford to invest, but if you have enough money to go Starbucks, if you have enough money to go to a restaurant, you have enough money to invest. You don't have to have a whole lot to get started. It's just more important that you do get started and that you just consistently put a little away at a time and just continue with that. And, anyway, they're a good place to start and get information without completely falling asleep.

I also like Eric Tyson's the various For Dummies book, Investing for Dummies, et cetera. I like his style, too. Also, not soporific.

Kevin: So if you were giving advice to someone who has not been investing yet and they wanted to start, you would say, "Well, Motley Fool is a good place to begin." Is there a particular tip of ... a particular area of Motley Fool that you would direct people as a rank beginner to start with?

Barbara: Well, when you go in, as I remember the way their website is set up, across the top they sort of have menus of where you're starting, like are you starting with debt reduction? Are you starting with, "Gee, I'm interested in lowering my tax burden"? Are you starting with, "Hey, I'm just interested in putting my toe into investing"? And they have it all pretty clear. If you just go to the Motley Fool website, it's all pretty clear where the beginning steps are. I think they even have one page that's like, "The beginning." So, yeah, I don't have it open just now, so, but I could open it.

Kevin: Right. And so, yeah, you would just start there, and they'll kind of guide you through. And that's the free part of the website, right? There's no fees or anything [crosstalk 00:22:20]?

Barbara: Yeah, there's lots of stuff available for free, and you can easily set up a little thing on your email to take anything they send that's saying, "Hey, don't you want to pay for this newsletter?" and just dump it into its own little file so you never even see it.

But, yeah, okay, I just opened up their website. We've got across the top it says, "How to invest. Learn how to invest. How to invest in stocks. Start investing with \$100 a month." Et cetera, et cetera.

Kevin: Okay, great.

Barbara: Another section for retirement, another for personal finance, so talking about credit cards, taxes, mortgages, saving and budgeting. So, yeah, and then there's the community ...

Kevin: And I'm sure they have forums, too. Yeah, the community, right.

Barbara: Yes, exactly. Yeah, they call it community. So, yeah.

Kevin: Fantastic.

Barbara: So, yeah, lots of ways to get into investing, and it's just one of those things that the sooner that you start, the better off you are, so even if all you're doing is just putting it in a very basic mutual fund ... As long as you're doing something, this is better than just kind of ignoring it.

Kevin: Exactly. Great.

Mark: That sounds good. So, your final tool is something you actually reviewed for us on Cool Tools. It's an autoharp, which is an unusual instrument, but it sounds great from the YouTube videos that I've looked at.

Barbara: Yeah, I'm really fond of it. It's very easy to use. That's one of the wonderful things about the autoharp is you can pick it up and almost immediately you can play it well enough to be able to sing along with it, which there's not too many other instruments I can think of that you can do that with. Most songs that you might want to play that have three chords, three major chords, the buttons are going to be three in a row. Your center button is going to be your one chord, your upper button's going to be the four chord, the bottom button's going to be the five chord, and you can just very easily plays things like "This Land is Your Land" or "Waltzing Matilda." I always start people with "This Land is Your Land" because you don't even to need to ... In that case, you're just going center finger, upper finger, center finger, bottom finger, center finger. You just keep that doing that, and it's like, okay, really don't need to learn a lot to be able to do that.

You can either stop there and just strum, or you can get more involved into it. You can pick melodies. There's also ... Most autoharps that are sold are what they call chromatic, and they'll have 15 or 21 chords or something like that, but you can also do a diatonic autoharp, which I converted my father's old autoharp into a diatonic, which means a lot of the strings are doubled. You get a much fuller sound, and when you're picking melodies you have twice as much chance to hit the right note.

But, yeah, it's a very quick learning curve, and you don't have to ... When I tried to learn to play guitar, it was like, "Oh my God, my fingers are killing me." Doesn't hurt your fingers. You don't have to memorize weird hand contortions for the chords. So it's a very versatile instrument. It can be very expressive, and you can either just use it to very simply play very simple accompaniments to yours or other people's singing, or go as far as you want with it. One of my teachers, Karen Mueller, she does full-speed Irish jigs on the thing, and you're just like, "How the hell do you move your fingers that fast?"

Mark: That's cool.

Kevin: If somebody wants to buy, are there particular models or brands or makes that you would recommend over others as maybe if you're looking for them new or used? Is there a particular model or make that's better than others?

Barbara: Well, Oscar Schmidt is kind of the standard, classic manufacturer. There was a period of time when their quality was a little spotty, but now they've kind of straightened out, so the new ones that they're making now are good instruments. I'm particularly fond ...

Kevin: What would people ...

Barbara: Mm-hmm (affirmative)?

Kevin: I'm sorry. What would people expect to pay for something? What's the range?

Barbara: I believe now most of them are like in the \$300, \$400 range for an Oscar. You can, of course, pay more depending on how many bells and whistles you desire. It's a good idea if at all possible to have your instrument set up by somebody who knows autoharps. Buy it from an actual autoharp shop or somebody who refurbishes them. I particularly like the chord bar setup that they call the Bowers setup. To me, it makes the sort of songs that I play a lot easier to play. The way they had, or at least to have ... I have to check and see if they're still that way, but the way they used to have the Oscars setup, it was a little confusing to my mind. But anyway, so the Bowers setup is nice.

The other nice thing about autoharp is once you get into it, you can get some books and stuff like that. There's one called The Autoharp Owner's Manual. Autoharp is really easy to take apart, rearrange, re-cut the felts. So the way it works is when you push down a chord bar, the felts are going to block every string except for the ones you want to ring. So if you push down the G bar, you're gonna get nothing but notes that are in the G chord. So if you decided you wanted, however, a Asus4 chord, all you have to do is take one of your bars, peel off the felt, get some new felt, an X-Acto knife, and cut little slots in it to open those strings. So it's an instrument that lends itself well to tinkering around and playing around with until you have exactly the sort of instrument that you want.

Kevin: That's cool. You mentioned in your notes about tuning it and using your phone to tune it. Can you explain that a little bit?

Barbara: Yeah, well, I've used various different little tuners. Snarks are good. But right now I'm using the iStrobeSoft, a little Strobe tuner that is on my iPhone, and so that way-

Kevin: So that's just an app? It's just a plain app using the microphone in the phone?

Barbara: Yeah, it's not ... Yeah, it's not free, but it's not real expensive. I think it was 10 bucks or something, and I find that very helpful. So for me with the diatonic autoharp I need to be particularly fussy about tuning because I've got so many doubled strings,

and if you have one string a few cents out of tune with the other one that it's supposed to be doubled with, it does not sound good. So, yeah, I need to be particularly fussy about that.

And that is the Achilles heel of autoharps is that you have 36 strings and you need to tune them. Once you get it settled in, you generally do not have to tune them all the time, but it does take ... It takes a while to get it in good tune until you get kind of used to it. But, yeah, tuning it is a little problematic, and you don't want to let it go too long without tuning, 'cause eventually it kind of drifts off, and then you try and play with somebody. You're like, "Whoa, that's like way off."

Kevin: And going back to the app, the [iStrobeSoft 00:31:01] tuning app.

Barbara: Yeah, iStroboSoft.

Kevin: iStroboSoft.

Barbara: By Peterson, who makes the Strobe ... Yeah, they make Strobe tuners.

Kevin: You load that app, you put the microphone and you tune it, and it gives you some kind of visual indication that you're ...

Barbara: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if you've ever seen a Strobe tuner, but it's ...

Kevin: No, I have not. Can you describe one?

Barbara: When you are ... Oh, okay. Yeah, so, well, when you're off-tune on ... Regular tuners, what you usually have is a needle or something that just goes back and forth, and when it's in the center, you're on tune. Strobe tuners, what they do, they sort of have this spinning dial when you're actually dealing with a real Strobe tuner, or when you're dealing with the app it's not a dial, it's just straight, if that makes any sense. But you see all these bars, these black and white bars, that are whirling by, and if they're whirling by, you're not in tune. What you want to do is adjust the tuning until the little black and white bars stop moving, and then you're in tune.

This one also has ... They also have available sweetened tunings and things like that so people that use sweetened tunings on their instruments can also use the iStroboSoft. That's like an extra little package that you buy. I just tune my autoharp straight. Some people use sweetened tunings on an autoharp. I don't because if I'm gonna be playing with somebody, chances are they're not gonna have that sweetened tuning, so I'd rather actually be in tune with the other people that I play with, since re-tuning an autoharp is not a thing that is done in short periods of time.

Kevin: Okay. And is there a site for people who want to follow you or read more about what you're up to?

Barbara: Not really at the moment, other than Facebook. But, yeah, I don't have a website at the moment.

Kevin: Well, they can always go to Cool Tools into the comments.

Barbara: There we go, yeah. Throw something there, and I go back and check things from time to time.

Kevin: Okay.

Mark: All right. Well, Barbara, this has been a real pleasure talking to you finally, and if you'd go to Cool Tools and search on Barbara's name I think you can find all the different excellent tools that she recommends. I hope you check it out. Barbara, this has been a blast. Thank you so much.

Barbara: Well thank you for inviting me.