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Viewpoint

POPULAR HEALTH ADVICE: ENTERTAINMENT OR RISK FACTOR?

These days it is hard to find a daily newspaper or magazine that does not dedicate space for providing health advice to readers. 'Alternative' medicine is currently booming and most of the articles now relate to this subject.[1] There is ample research to show that many of our patients obtain their medical knowledge from such columns.[2] It is therefore pertinent to ask how reliable such information is.

The short answer to this question is that, regrettably, it often is not just unreliable but dangerous. We have conducted several investigations in this area and found that:

- Books on alternative medicine regularly contain advice that can be life threatening.[3]
- Websites are frequently commercially motivated and contain information, which is at best misleading and at worst dangerous.[4]
- Newspaper articles often have no evidential basis at all and can endanger the health of the reader.[5]

But let's not lose our sense of humour. Nobody takes these articles seriously — they are just a bit of fun! We should also accept that health writers have to make a living. Many seem to know little about medicine, so their comments are not always based on scientific evidence.

I agree that journalists may be forgiven for publishing what sells well, even if it is not evidence based — but what about experts? I find it difficult to tolerate medical nonsense from doctors. Surely they should know better!

A recent example is an article on iridology.[6] Here Lydia Gard explains what iridology is and describes her own consultation with an iridologist. At the end she concludes 'I am convinced'. To give this statement more weight, she also interviews Dr Mosaraf Ali who believes that 'conventional medicine will accept iridology in time'. Dr Ali is quoted as saying, 'As a unique method, you have to take iridology with a pinch of salt. However, substantiate it with other auxiliary diagnostic techniques, and it stands out as an extraordinary method of analysis. The reason it is unproven is because our scientific parameters are currently so restricted'.[6] This statement is typical for many similar comments and therefore deserves closer inspection.

Iridology is a method of detecting tiny defects or impurities in the iris. Their location and colour tell the iridologist which organ is endangered. Iridologists make several assumptions that are clearly out of line with our knowledge of anatomy and physiology.[7] In other words, the method is biologically implausible. It is also no 'auxiliary diagnostic' technique such as the ESR or taking a temperature. It is quite simply rubbish. Dr Ali's claim that iridology is unproven is wrong. At least five rigorous tests show it to be invalid.[7,8] In other words, the method is not 'unproven' but 'disproven'. Dr Ali's assumption that 'scientific parameters are currently so restricted' also is incorrect. Nothing is easier than testing the reproducibility of iridologists' findings. This has nothing to do with 'restrictions of science'.

For several reasons, this example is, I think, particularly telling:

- Dr Ali has considerable influence, for example, he advises Prince Charles on alternative medicine. His opinion therefore weighs heavily.
- He seems to have little knowledge about the published evidence in an area that he readily comments on (for example, iridology).
- He seems to misunderstand what science can and cannot achieve.
- He seems to believe that his knowledge is more advanced than science ('… scientific parameters are currently so restricted') or that, in other words, science will one day catch up with his wisdom.

I find the last aspect especially infuriating: not only are these promoters of nonsense uninformed about their very own subject, they also have the audacity and arrogance to imply superiority of their disproven assumptions over multiple scientific investigations. There you are: I have lost my sense of humour!

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